

THE ADVENTURES OF LITTLE KNIGHT

BRAVE

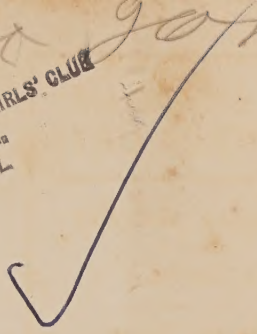
FRANCES B. REES





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PT. ST. CHARLES BOYS' & GIRLS' CLUB
255 ASH AVE.
MONTREAL



To Kingston

From Auntie Edith

Xmas
1902

THE
ADVENTURES OF
LITTLE KNIGHT BRAVE

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LITTLE KNIGHT BRAVE**



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“You won’t, won’t you! We’ll see about that!”

[Page 131.]

THE
ADVENTURES OF
LITTLE KNIGHT BRAVE

ILLUSTRATED WITH 40
PEN & INK DRAWINGS
By ALICE R. LEU

FRANCES BYRNE REES



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TO
JOSEPH HENRY WALSH
AND
THOMAS BYRNE WALSH

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THE ADVENTURES OF LITTLE KNIGHT BRAVE

CHAPTER I

THE CITY OF CIRCLES

ONCE upon a time there was a King who was so kind and good that all his people loved him. Every now and then he made a grand tour among them, visiting every town and hamlet over which he ruled, but the greater part of the time he lived in the principal city of his kingdom. His palace, the most magnificent that ever was, surrounded by its beautiful parks and grounds, stood in the exact center of this city. In fact, the city was built around the palace, each street forming a complete circle, one around the other.

In the first, called the Inner, or Court Circle, which surrounded the palace grounds, lived the highest nobles of the court; in the circle immediately surrounding that were the homes of the next highest in rank, and so on, circle after circle—the wider the circle the lower the rank, through the whole line of nobility. Riches claimed next place—the wealthiest people occupying the circle directly surrounding the widest nobility circle, those not quite so well off the one next to that—the circles becoming wider and wider, the houses smaller and smaller, the inhabitants poorer and poorer, until in the last, widest circle of all, on the very outskirts of the city, only the very poorest

of the poor lived in the smallest of houses, mostly log cabins.

Outside the exclusive territory occupied by the nobility, every tenth circle was reserved for business pur-



"The city was built around the palace."

poses; in them the stores, banks, theaters—all public buildings whatsoever, except the churches and school-houses, were to be found.

Besides the circles, every here and there broad avenues

ran from the outermost circle of the city, clear to the Inner, or Court Circle, very much like the spokes of a wheel, the largest circle representing the rim, and the King's palace the hub. Every other one of these avenues was called park lands, for each block, from circle to circle, was planted with flowers and grass and trees; there were fountains here and there, and swings every place one could be put up conveniently. These were public parks, and the people, from the oldest inhabitant down to the tot taken there for his daily airing, enjoyed them very much. In these park lands, too, were built the churches and school-houses; no other buildings were permitted to be placed facing the parks. All the avenues between the park lands—that is, what would be every other spoke in the wheel—were called thoroughfares; through these ran the cars, cabs, public and private conveyances, all sorts of wagons and carts; in short, they were the streets by which the social and business traffic of the city was conducted from circle to circle, and as the city was not only laid out in circles, but its social system was constructed on the same plan, its name was a very appropriate one indeed—it was called the City of Circles.

The city itself stood in the midst of a dense forest, which was enchanted, and looked so dark and gloomy that even the stoutest heart quailed at the thought of penetrating its fastnesses. It hedged the city in, three quarters of the way round, thus leaving only one quarter by which it could be entered or departed from in safety, which was a great inconvenience to the inhabitants.

The forest had not always been enchanted. Time was when its leafy recesses were the joy of the whole kingdom, and especially to the beautiful City of Circles, which

lay, calm and serene, in its green embrace. Great hunts had taken place there, picnics and outings of all sorts, and, as a playground for children, nowhere half so delightful was ever imagined.

But all that had been changed!

One day, almost five hundred years before the time of Little Knight Brave, there was a great celebration in honor of the coming of age of the young Prince, heir to the throne. Hardly was the sun up ere the city was almost deserted, everyone who could hastening off to the green woods to enjoy himself in what manner he thought best, all sorts of amusements having been provided.

Toward the close of the afternoon there was a sumptuous banquet, for which tables were spread in the park lands, and hosts of cooks who had been busy for weeks, and waiters and their assistants, were in readiness to seat and serve the people till everybody should be satisfied. The day wound up with the grandest display of fireworks ever shot into the blue, and the multitude went home actually tired out with happiness, never dreaming that their last day of pleasure in their beloved forest was ended.

In the morning they heard the direful tidings:

The Magic Jewel of the Forest had been stolen from the King's crown! When it is known that with this wonderful gem went full power over the forest, the extent of the calamity may be imagined.

It was feared from certain marks—an odd footprint in one of the flower beds near an unguarded window in an obscure part of the palace, and a grotesque metal figure (supposed to have been broken from the handle of the dagger wherewith the guard to the crown had been slain, stabbed in the back)—that the Magic Jewel had been



“Under a great glass case, the crown was kept.”

stolen by the King of the wicked Gnomes, for the Gnomes, who as a general thing live in the heart of the mountains, are the most wonderful workmen in metals ever known. The majority of them are good, industrious little people, too, but here and there a tribe of very wicked ones is to be found.

It was surmised, and afterwards accepted as a fact, that these wicked little fellows had come down from the mountains at the hour when the city was almost deserted and those remaining in it at their busiest, and had easily gained access to the Palace and Throne Room, where, under a great glass case, the crown was kept, on a royal purple velvet cushion, hand embroidered in gold and jewels by the Queen.

After that the forest was feared and shunned, and became a great inconvenience to the people; for only by that portion left unfripped by its waving trees could they enter

or leave their beautiful City of Circles. Scarcely a year passed without some attempt being made to regain the precious gem. At first a whole company of knights and soldiers was fitted out, and rode gallantly off into the forest, but magic is a hard thing with which to do battle; not one of the number ever returned, or was heard of again. So with each and every expedition that had gone forth, until, finally, no man was sent on what was considered a hopeless quest, though every now and then small bands volunteered their services—some for glory, some for the more substantial reward they knew would be theirs should they succeed, and some with only the welfare of their country in their minds and hearts, for the regaining of the Magic Jewel of the Forest meant so much to the whole people.

Among these last was Little Knight Brave's father.

CHAPTER II

LITTLE KNIGHT BRAVE

LITTLE KNIGHT BRAVE'S real name was Joseph, but few people remembered that. From his earliest days he had been such a gentle little fellow, yet so fearless in the right, so careful of his mother and courteous to his elders, that his mother called him her Little Knight—a title which fit him so well that everyone was quick to take it up. His comrades added the last part, so "Little Knight Brave" he became in name, as in deed; and he really deserved the honor conferred upon him, which cannot be said of everyone who enjoys such distinction. When all hope for the return of Little Knight's father had been given up—except by Little Knight and his mother—the man to whose care he had confided his property and the welfare of his wife and son proved false to the trust, the poor woman was forced to move from her pretty home, first to a circle three degrees wider, then farther and farther from the King's palace, and nearer and nearer the dark woods, until, at last, they were forced to take a little log cabin in the widest, outermost circle of all, directly facing the fearsome forest.

But Little Knight declared he liked it better than any place they had lived since they left home, for they still called the pretty cottage home. They had the whole wild beauty of the mysterious woods to feast their eyes upon,

summer and winter, instead of another crowded row of cramped houses, such as had been opposite them in the circles in which they had last lived.

He was scarcely eight years old when his father went away, and, of course, was neither big enough nor strong enough to chop down trees or saw logs, but he went into the dread forest to look for fagots, going farther than any of his comrades, even the older boys, dared, and carrying armful after armful of nice "crooked" ones home—for the crooked ones twine in with each other and make the hottest fire; then off he would start again to fetch water from a noisy little stream which ran into the woods about half a mile away.

In the daytime half the terror that clung around the forest vanished, for the trees looked so friendly with their green boughs outstretched to greet him, Little Knight fancied, and there were such lovely flowers growing at their roots and in shady and sunny nooks, and especially along the banks of the little stream. He went without fear far into its inviting-looking recesses; sometimes following the streamlet's course, marked by tall, sedgy grasses, and sometimes boldly striking right in among the wilderness of trees itself, and always bringing back such trophies from its green depths as made his comrades' eyes open, half in wonder at the treasures, half in honest respect and admiration—not unmixed with awe—for one who dared venture so far into the gloomy, fear-inspiring place.

Little Knight always laughed and told them there was nothing to be afraid of in the daytime, and, oh! such beauties to see; but they shook their heads, and urged him not to enter the forest again—some dreadful thing would surely happen him. But Little Knight remembered

the sunlight that fell through the green boughs of the great old trees, sunlight never so bright, never so golden, it seemed to him, as just beyond the line they dared not cross; he showed them the flowers, larger and more fragrant than any to be gathered on the outskirts of the forest; the pebbles of curious shapes and colors, which he fished up from the bed of the stream; he told them of the odd-looking birds' nests, which, however, he would never bring out to them, no matter how much they might coax. But the pleasure of his forest rambles faded with the light of day. He was afraid to go near the woods after nightfall; indeed, there were few men in the kingdom who would care to tempt its dangers alone at any time. There was noth-



“He went . . . to look for fagots.”

ing really definite known concerning what went on when once swallowed up in its alluring depths. Perhaps that was what made the strange tales told so fearsome. Somehow, one would rather know for sure that he would be killed by bears, or lions, or tigers, than to be uncertain as to what fate might overtake him. It had been believed for many years that not only wild beasts, but Gnomes and Giants dwelt in the enchanted depths, and Fairies roamed as they willed through the green aisles—and just *what* would the Gnomes and the Giants do?

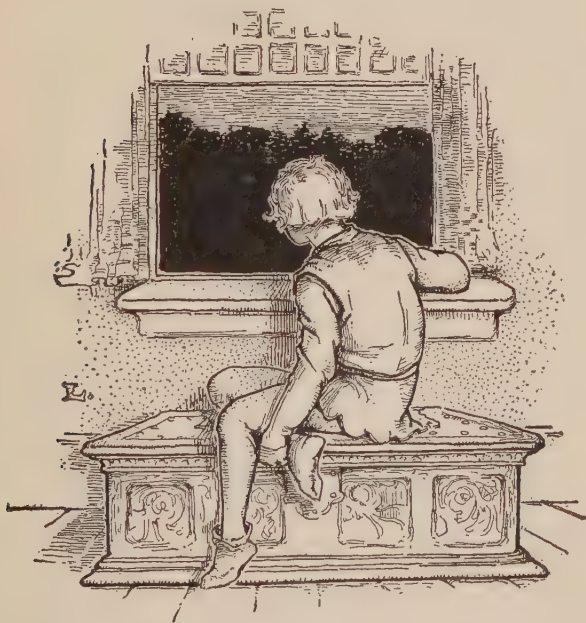
Be that as it may, it was not only the children's hair which stood on end after an evening spent in relating and listening to the tales, legendary and otherwise, of the happenings which took place so near them; and Little Knight, although some of the strange legends made his very heart stand still, was always a fascinated auditor.

At night when he went to bed he looked out at the dark belt of trees across from his little window, and it seemed to him kingdoms would not tempt him to enter beneath their enchanted boughs again; but the very next morning, lo! the sun shone brightly over all the waving tree tops, the birds sang gayly as they flew off to take their morning dip in the prattling stream and drink of its clear waters; everything looked so inviting that he was tempted to go just to the edge, then a little beyond; and a little farther still, till he became so engrossed in the beauties around him, and in gathering his daily load of fagots, that the tales of the night before were forgotten, and almost before he was aware of it he found himself so widely separated from his companions that only the faintest echo of their shouts at play, or their halloos to

him, reached him from beyond the green distances through which he had come.

Thus did the forest beguile Little Knight.

Some days its call was more insistent than others, and he would wander on and on, his mind teeming with vivid



“At night . . . he looked out at the dark belt of trees.”

fancies, in which his father was always the central figure—his father coming home. And when he felt he had not time to venture farther, he would pause, gazing wistfully down some dark, wild-grown forest aisle, and imagine he could see the dear form on the great chestnut steed, could

see the loving smile on the bronzed face, just as he had that never-to-be-forgotten day when the rider turned, on the edge of the forest, to exchange one last look with his wife and child, who bravely kept back the tears and waved him "Godspeed" ere he disappeared into the enchanted shadows.

Only it was a glad smile, instead of the sad one he had seen, that Little Knight always imagined, for it was the triumphant return he pictured. But after a few moments given to the wistful gazing and the strong yearning which made his heart beat with pain, he would reluctantly turn and retrace his steps, leaving the haunting, haunted aisles behind him.

CHAPTER III

THE LITTLE PRINCESS'S BIRTHDAY FÊTE

ONE day, just after Little Knight was ten years old, it was announced that a great festival was to be held in celebration of the Little Princess's birthday, and of the bountiful harvests which had been granted them.

What a day that was! Little Knight never forgot it.

There was a great daylight procession wherein every trade and business was represented, and the farmers, who were the guests of honor of the occasion, all dressed in homespun, with gigantic straw hats whose brims were so wide they flopped up and down with every step of the wearer; and as every farmer carried a scythe, they presented a warlike appearance which mightily pleased the King, for it showed him that even his most peaceable subjects could, and would if called upon, be a formidable addition to his army. Then there were wagons trimmed with sheaves of wheat and green leaves, and drawn by the strong farm horses bedecked with gay ribbon rosettes and garlands, wherein were the farmers' families carrying green branches; the heavier wagons were piled with orchard and farm products, with a big jovial farmer, enthroned on a barrel of apples or a mammoth pumpkin, beaming around on the people, while a couple of boys were kept busy pitching the load among them. What a

scuffling and shouting there was, to be sure; some jumping this way, to keep from getting hit by a great rosy globe, while others jumped that in their efforts to catch it.

But what Little Knight enjoyed most of all was the conclave of warriors and court guards in their rich crimson velvet habiliments and glistening armor, who, each on a coal-black horse, preceded His Royal Highness, who was also mounted on a coal-black steed. What beautiful horses they were! With proudly raised heads, finely dilated nostrils, slender, lithe limbs, and dainty feet which seemed to scarcely touch the earth!

Next came the Queen and ladies of the Court in broad open landaus, which were all white and gold and garlanded with flowers, and drawn by six white horses. The Queen wore her robes of state, the other ladies being gowned, in one sense of the word, as the farmers' wives were, in their very best, and each according to her individual taste, so that they formed a gorgeous, and to the gentler half of the populace the grandest, feature in the parade; indeed, the variety of colors, the different styles, each exquisite in itself, was a relief to the eye after the company on company of knights and soldiers who, though some certain color made each regiment distinct from the other, yet had a uniform sameness; and while their martial look made enthusiasm and pride run high, it was as nothing compared to the interest the ladies of the Court aroused—an interest which even the men shared, as shown by their huzzas given with a will as they went by.

But Little Knight, though he liked the gay colors, looked lingeringly after the line of warriors whose armor he could see glistening far down the street as the sunlight caught it here and there and drew out a dazzling

streak from the polished silver and steel; for though there were a dozen mounted escorts, six on either side of each landau, and every man wore his uniform and armor, they did not make nearly the show they did *en compagnie*, the martial appearance of which made Little Knight's heart beat so fast and his eyes glow with admiration. If he might only be a knight when he grew up, he was thinking, watching eagerly to catch the last gleam far down the street, when the cry, "The Princess, the Princess!" resounded. He turned and craned his neck to catch the first glimpse of the Little Royal Lady of the Court. How fair she was! Just as one imagined a princess should be. Unlike the grown-up ladies, who were all grouped in landaus, she rode a beautiful little pony; milk white it was, with trappings of silver almost hidden in their trimmings of pink roses. The Little Royal Lady, dressed in white silk that glistened in the sun, looked like a rose herself with a crown of pink buds and green leaves set on her pale gold hair which floated round her like a veil. Over her head was a canopy of white silk fringed with gold. It was garlanded with pink roses on top, and fluted on the underside to a golden-rayed sun in the center. Four youths, sons of the highest nobles of the Court, walking two on either side, upheld the canopy by its rose-garlanded poles.

The Little Princess held in her hand a single rose, and upon this, almost as much as upon the fair child herself, all eyes were riveted, for the rose was not a common rose, nor had it a common history.

A few days before the little girl's sixth birthday the Head Royal Gardener had brought a new rose into bloom; it was of the true rose-pink tint, and though no

larger than the rambler rose, was so exquisitely perfect that it had at once been christened the "Little Royal Lady Rose." The Little Princess took a great fancy to it.

On the eve of her birthday the King and Queen, to crown her joys told her they would grant her any one thing she should ask, if in their power to do so. The moment she was apprised of this royal indulgence off she flew to her favorite cozy corner, a deep, soft-cushioned window-seat in her nursery, where she sat apparently gazing out upon the beautiful park, but really dreaming of the Fairy Rosebush, as she called it. She was a very imaginative, unselfish child, and had always been fond of stories—her nurse and mother had told them to her from the time she could listen until, at a very early age, she had learned to read them herself—so it is not much to be wondered at that at last she dreamt one herself!

"Oh, I know what I shall do now!" she cried, and starting up, she danced joyfully off to her parents.

She wanted to visit the fairy bush the first thing next morning, pluck all the roses in bloom, and give them away, one at a time, during the day; then each recipient should make a wish which should be granted when presented with the rose to Their Royal Majesties! The King and Queen gladly promised to carry out their part of the contract.

Bright and early the little girl gathered her roses—three fairy beauties—and what flattery she met with, from the highest to the lowest in the Court; and how chagrined they all were when they found that every "Little Lady" had been disposed of before breakfast!

The first went to her nurse, who wanted only the assurance that she should serve her little mistress to the end

of her days; but the "little mistress" frowned at and hugged her, and scolded, "That wish doesn't belong to you, Letty, it has been my very, own, favorite one ever since I was born—you can't wish it—you must think up a real, new, fresh one that I've never heard!" and Letty's nephew became a Knight of the Royal Guards. Way down in the royal kitchen the second "Little Lady" found the patient little chore boy, who was now one of the brightest scholars of his age in the Royal Academy; and earth seemed turned to paradise to a little lame girl who received the last dainty flower, for walking seemed most as good to her as flying! With her parent's sanction, the Little Princess resolved to carry out this beautiful idea every year, and as the King decreed that no similar bush should be grown, wherever it went the Little Royal Lady rose brought a different joy than any other blossom. The fairy bush became famous and surely must have been charmed, for each birthday, and this was the third, just three "Little Ladies" had nodded good morning to the Little Princess when she went to pluck them.

No wonder the people were almost breathless when they caught sight of the rose in the Little Princess's hand. Two were disposed of; to whom would the last one go!

Little Knight Brave knew all about the roses and a great deal about the Little Princess. He had seen her a few times only, but admired her very much, ever since the first year of the roses—"She did *ez-zack-ly* as I would like to do!" he told his mother then.

To-day his eyes filled with admiration as he saw her approaching. He, too, saw the rose she carried. What had she done with the others, he wondered. Then sud-



“He, too, saw the rose she carried.”

denly his clasp tightened on his mother's hand, his face paled—but in less than a second he was off—for an instant everyone was breathless as they saw him under the pony's feet—but almost quicker than thought he was up again, holding the pony by the bridle; he released him as soon as he stood still, and disentangling a strap which in some way had become loosened and hung dangerously in front of the mettlesome little steed's hoofs, buckled it in place. His presence of mind had saved the Little Princess a bad fall if it had not averted a serious accident. It was all over in less time than it takes to tell it, and Little Knight stepped aside and stood bareheaded, almost bewildered by the cheers of the sympathetic crowd. One

instant his blue eyes met the brown ones of the rider. She was lovelier near than at a distance he thought. The next moment she was leaning forward, toward him. "Take it, boy," a soft voice was saying, but he did not realize the rose she held out was meant for him, till one of the young men who was holding the canopy said, "She means you."

A wondrous light broke over Little Knight's face. He did not think of the wish that went with the flower; his only thought was that the Little Princess, his dream companion, was giving him her rose! There could be no doubt, for with a still sweeter smile, one which seemed to have a meed of friendship in it, and a light in her eyes as if some sudden, whimsical fancy pleased her, she repeated, "Take it, Little Knight!" and Little Knight took the rose without a word.

The procession moved on.

Oh, how he regretted his silence! But he had been so taken by surprise! Among all the people to whom he had, in fancy, donated the rose, he had never once thought of himself. And he had not even thanked her! If he had only kissed her hand, as the knights in the story books always did—but his surprise had held him speechless. Had he known it, his looks had spoken for him.

There was a glow in the little girl's heart as she rode on. What a beautiful boy! Already she anticipated the moment he would present his rose. What would he wish—something noble, she knew. He had come to her rescue just like grown-up knights did to their ladies when they were in danger. "Little Knight" she had called him on the spur of the moment, and the title just suited him!

How glad she was she had kept that rose so long and had it to give him!

The air was resounding with cheers all around them; cheers for the Little Princess and her rescuer. As the procession swept by, Little Knight, clasping his rose close, stepped back to his mother's side.

CHAPTER IV

THE ROYAL MANDATE

NAR into the night Little Knight and his mother sat talking over the pleasures of the day, and the, to them, great event of it. They had left early in the morning to make a pilgrimage to their old home, so it happened none of their neighbors was present when the rose was bestowed, and as they were undecided about the wish, they concluded not to mention it till some time later. Little Knight urged his mother to make use of it, but employment was the only thing for which she felt she could ask and maintain her independence, and as one of the large firms of the city kept her well supplied with fine sewing and the making of laces—a work most congenial to her—that would seem almost like throwing the rose away. Besides, she wished her boy to have the full benefit of the Little Princess's gift. Finally she suggested preserving it until he should be older; she knew a way to keep it bright and fresh-looking indefinitely. The Kingdom schools which he attended were very good, and he would lose nothing by waiting. Little Knight was much pleased with this plan—he could wish and wish for everybody; it was almost like having a whole bouquet!

The first thing he did next day was to run to see his treasure; then his mother having finished an order, he left

her preserving the rose while he started off to deliver the work.

As he drew near his destination he became aware of an unusual silence, to which, however, there seemed to be an undercurrent of excitement. Knots of men stood here and there; groups of women were gathered in front of stores which were empty of clerks and customers alike; and when, at last, he caught sight of a clump of newsboys huddled together, talking earnestly instead of flying in all directions noisily crying their wares, he was convinced something dreadful had taken place. He was sure it was dreadful, everybody looked so solemn, and here and there he saw a woman brush her eyes with her handkerchief, or the corner of her apron, for all classes and conditions were commingled.

"What's the matter, boy?" he inquired of one of the "newsies."

"Gee! Here's a duffer from nowhere! He wants to know what the matter is!" cried the urchin, but immediately his humor departed and he answered gravely, "The Little Princess has been stolen—by the Gnomes!" He whispered the last, while he glanced over his shoulder fearfully, as if half expecting to see one of the wicked little men leering at him.

Little Knight could scarcely believe he had heard aright. But it was too true—the little girl had vanished—there was no trace of either her or her nurse to be found. The Queen, who had kissed her little daughter good night about nine o'clock the previous evening, was the last who had seen them.

However, it was the general belief that the miscreants were the same who had stolen the Magic Jewel, for the stab

which had caused the guard's death answered in every detail the description (left by the Court Physicians) of



“‘The Little Princess has been stolen—by the Gnomes!’”

the wound received by the Guard to the Crown centuries before.

As soon as his errand was accomplished, Little Knight flew home to tell the sorrowful news. The rest of that

day passed like a nightmare. The whole Kingdom mourned. It seemed that everyone knew of some particular act of kindness the little girl had done.

Only the day before she was among them, bright and joyous. She had played with the other children as one of themselves. Rank was forgotten; the freemasonry of childhood leveled all barriers. She it was who started the dance around the Maypole, played "London Bridge," and all the old, old games with the farmers' children, who were her special guests, though the others were not forgotten—and now—mothers drew their little ones closer, and "Oh, the poor Queen!" "Oh, the poor King!" was heard over and over again. The dread unknown! That was what must almost kill them—yet it was that, perhaps, which helped them to live through it; they *must* live to help her!

The first thing his subjects did on hearing of the disappearance of the Little Princess was to send in a petition to their kind ruler to remain with them, while hundreds volunteered to go in search of the little one; for, as he had no other child, in case of his death or disappearance, a cousin, a wicked man, the exact opposite of the monarch then reigning, would succeed to the throne. Kingly allegiance was never more sorely tried; for there is an allegiance of the King to the people as well as of the people to the King; and to remain inactive under such distressing circumstances was the hardest thing he had ever been called upon to do; but he remained true to his subjects, and they in turn proved true to him.

Again were enacted the scenes of that past black century when the Gnomes gained control over the forest. Companies of brave men went into its enchanted depths

and—vanished—till finally the King determined to put a stop to the sacrifice. It was not right that so many children be deprived of their fathers because he had been left childless.

And so, shortly after the King came to this decision, as Little Knight was returning from school one day, he saw the Court Herald approaching. He was dressed all in white, even to his boots, the long plume on his hat floating out like a wave of foam upon the breeze. Halting his snowy steed at the corner, he proclaimed the Royal Mandate, while the two couriers who accompanied him tacked a paper taken from a roll they carried, upon the post nearest the school. This was one of the “Proclamation Posts” which were erected at the principal corners of every city and town throughout the Kingdom, and whereunto copies of the King’s orders were always affixed.

As soon as he could get near enough Little Knight read the Mandate, which was to the effect that henceforth no one should enter the forest in search of the Little Princess or the Magic Jewel without special permission being granted by His Royal Majesty, the King. Certainly no loyal subject would undertake the task without permission after that, for no matter how praiseworthy the object might be, none would care to enter the gloomy forest under the King’s ban; a guilty conscience is a dispiriting companion under the brightest circumstances.

As it became clear to him, Little Knight’s heart beat fast and his eyes glowed—he remembered his rose. How glad he was he had kept it! His greatest desire was to go upon the Quest, and he felt the King would never grant him permission, at least not until he was years older, if he had to rely solely upon his own petition; but when

he saw the rose—he surely could not break the promise to the Little Princess!

In the two years which had passed since the little girl had been stolen, Little Knight had not altered much,



“He was dressed all in white, even to his boots.”

though he was taller and his face wore a graver expression than is usual in one so young. His mother now thought him capable of undertaking the Quest. She had always sympathized with him in his dream of freeing the forest from the Gnomes' enchantment. Though she had seen so many set out never to be heard of more, she had a strange

conviction that he would succeed. Aside from being so brave—they had all been that—Little Knight was so good and innocent; and the pure in heart often go unscathed where failure, only, waits upon the footsteps of all others; and time but served to strengthen her belief. They always spoke of his return from the Quest as if the undertaking was no more than a journey to the King's palace; indeed Little Knight dreaded that unavoidable interview with the King much more than his going into the forest; he had planned that part of it so often that he had grown accustomed to thinking of himself as an inhabitant of the forest and felt as if it were an old chum who would welcome him in his campings out; its trees would shelter him—its birds, all its little denizens, would be his friends; they would be on his side in his encounters with those other inhabitants who roamed, unwelcome, he felt sure, through its green aisles.

CHAPTER V

LITTLE KNIGHT GOES TO THE KING'S PALACE

LITTLE KNIGHT chose the first general reception day after the close of school for the long vacation, near the end of April, to seek the King's permission. Bright and beautiful it proved to be. He walked briskly along buoyed up by his mother's encouraging words, till he approached the palace gates when his footsteps lagged—which was not at all surprising! The power, the majesty of a King are things of awe to older and more experienced persons than Little Knight; then, too, he was going to ask a favor; many hearts trembled with excitement in merely approaching and paying their respects to Royalty in the customary way; how much more fortitude did it not require not only to approach, but to beg a private audience with His August Majesty! Besides, with the passing of time, the King had been less and less inclined to grant permission to go in quest of the Little Princess or the Magic Jewel.

On nearing one of the magnificent entrances after a good half hour's walk through the park, Little Knight felt nervously for his talisman, the Little Royal Lady Rose, summoned all his courage, and before it had time to "ooze through his fingertips" went quickly forward and put his foot on the lowermost of the six broad steps which led to the veranda. Immediately, as if he had touched a

hidden spring, a soldier, spear to shoulder, appeared at the top, directly in front of him. Little Knight's eyes were round with astonishment. Had he popped up out of the marble paving of the porch like a jack-in-the-box? The man, too, stared, then asked curtly:

"What do you want?"

"I—please, I came to see the King," stammered Little Knight.

"Oh, you did, did you?" returned the man in not at all a polite way, Little Knight thought. "Well, the King is not on exhibition to the likes of you this afternoon."

The color mounted to Little Knight's fair brow, but he kept his temper. He had not anticipated any trouble in being allowed into the King's presence to-day; it was a long journey from the Outer Circle, and, too, he had nerved himself to the interview and could not bear the thought of postponing it and having it all to go through again; and, of course, this person had no idea of the important mission he was on—because of his ignorance of that—and of other things, notably good manners, which he had thought would be in evidence on all sides here—he could excuse him; so he said:

"I did not mean just that—I wish to speak to him," but the surly individual only stared insolently past him, till, realizing that his wooden attitude had no effect on Little Knight, he snapped, "Good day!" and commenced fingering his spear, but Little Knight stood his ground bravely and began once more:

"I have come a long distance to see His Majesty. It is very important. Could you not at least tell him that someone wishes——"

"Go 'long, boy!" said the soldier crossly, "you have



"What do you want?"

kept me standing here too long now. What does the King care, think you, for your 'very important' business!" and he laughed derisively as he eyed the slip of a lad before him. "Go to the —" "Kitchen with your begging," he was about to add, but something in the boy's eyes stayed him. This was no beggar — this slim youth with proudly poised head, might well be a young prince. "Run along," he substituted,

"you're wasting more valuable time than your own here." By this time Little Knight began to lose patience.

"This is a general reception day; I do not know why I should not be admitted unless, perhaps, I have come to the wrong entrance. Be so kind as to direct me to the door which the people generally use," he said courteously, but with a certain ring of dignity in his voice, as of one who knew his rights and demanded them, that, despite his youthful appearance, the soldier unconsciously acknowledged his superiority; and although he still kept up a show of being sarcastic, there was a grumbling respect in his tone as he said:

"Why didn't you say so then? I thought it was the

King you asked me to direct you to, but if it's only a door—" Little Knight did not seem to notice this ungraciousness; he stood silent, with the cool dignity of one born to rule, and awaited the man's directions; but before the soldier saw fit to enlighten him the faint murmur of voices, the rustle of silks and satins, was heard, and from a French window a short distance up the veranda a bevy of ladies appeared.

Instantly the soldier turned, drew himself up, and, hand to cap, saluted, while he flung back over his shoulder: "Get thee gone, boy," but the central figure in the group heard the words and caught sight of Little Knight standing there on the marble steps, his fair head uncovered, for instinctively he had removed his hat when the ladies came to view. He made a beautiful picture with his velvet cloak thrown back over one shoulder, while from the rolling collar his flushed face, with its aureole of golden hair, stood out like a clear-cut cameo. The Queen raised her hand to stay him, and speaking to the soldier, asked: "Who is this boy, and what does he wish?"



"I—please, I came to see the King."

"A strange lad, Your Majesty, strayed into the private grounds by mistake. He shall not trouble Your Majesty!" With a great show of zeal he half turned toward Little Knight, but the Queen stopped his evident intention with a motion of her hand.

"Come hither, young sir," she called to Little Knight in a kind voice. As he obeyed the order Little Knight's heart beat so, he felt so trembly, he was afraid they would see his knees shaking, for half a dozen pairs of eyes were upon him. He did not note the open admiration with which they were regarding him, for he kept his own raised steadfastly to the Queen's face, which, as he drew closer, he saw was saddened by an expression of chastened sorrow and longing. It reminded him of his mission, and his nervousness left him. With a bearing which in one so young was as quaint as it was charming, he bent on one knee before Her Majesty, saluting her like a practiced courtier. The ladies were delighted and the Queen rewarded him with a kindly smile as she bade him arise. In answer to her request, Little Knight told of his desire to see the King on very important business, amusing the ladies, and the Queen also by his quick, suggestive glance toward them, just as an older diplomat might, who felt he could not make known his mission in their presence, yet deplored the necessity of their, or his own, withdrawal. The ladies were enchanted with him.

The Queen felt more animated, more interested in this interview than in anything that had happened since the Little Princess had been stolen—though she often forced herself to smile and appear gay—for no one, not even a Queen, or one should say, much less a Queen, can afford to indulge in her grief openly for any great length

of time; that would be very selfish. She nodded to her ladies in waiting with a gleam of laughter in her eyes; then turning to Little Knight, said graciously:

“Come, young sir, we will go to the King.”

The soldier saluted Her Majesty, and gave Little Knight a nod of respect as he stared after them. It was all he could do to keep his mouth from following the example set by his eyes, which were opened to their widest extent. Hitherto any one who had been so fortunate as to approach the Queen near enough to gain her personal attention, had been relegated to a third party to have his wants satisfied.

But as he followed her, Little Knight never dreamt of the honor paid him. With all his courtly manners and quaint graces, partly taught him by his mother, partly gleaned from his reading, his knowledge of life at Court was very limited, and his conception of its formalities and etiquette extremely original. When he reached the window by which Her Majesty entered the palace, he turned and bowed to the bevy of delighted maids. After that it seemed to him he stepped across the sill right into the heart of Fairyland. Thick, soft carpets, silken draperies, the glint of gold and bronze, of marble statuary, pictures, rare plants and flowers and bright-plumaged birds—glimpses of fountains, of dancing sunbeams through stained and prised glass—it was beyond his dreams! But he could not fully enjoy it now—his pulses were bounding, his heart trip-tripping madly—he was on his way to the King, to His Most August Majesty, to present his petition!

Once or twice the Queen looked down at him with a kindly smile, though she spoke no word in question of the

"important business." At last they came to a small, exquisitely appointed room, where she bade him be seated, while she rang a silver bell which summoned a courier, whom she directed to ascertain if His Majesty were at leisure to receive her. Almost before Little Knight realized he was gone, he was back with an affirmative answer, and telling the boy to await her, the Queen went alone to the Audience Chamber. In a few moments she again entered the room and announced:

"The King will see you, young sir." Little Knight arose, but Her Majesty sat down. He stopped dismayed. She noticed his hesitation and said with a wave of her hand toward the door:

"The courier awaits to conduct you to the King's presence."

"But—" began Little Knight and again stopped.

"But what?" asked she, smiling openly at him. "You must not lose your courage, the King will be kind, I assure you."

"Oh, it is not that, but I thought—you would be there too!"

"I? Would you want me?" asked she gravely, but there was again a gleam of amusement in her eyes. "I fancied your business was strictly private."

"It is of interest to you, as well as to the King, Your Majesty," replied Little Knight, with an earnestness which removed all idea of presumption, "and I thought if the King should not want to grant my request, that perhaps, if you would be so kind, you might help me coax him."

Children were rare visitors at the palace, and though the Queen drove frequently through all classes of neighborhoods, and tried to show her interest in the little ones,

whether in palace or cot, the children were invariably surrounded by prompting elders, solicitous that they be seen at what they, the elders, considered their best, in her presence; and so Her Majesty's efforts to establish an acquaintance with the *real* children were fruitless. The most she could do was to give smiles to the wealthy and both smiles and more substantial gifts to those in need, having never a chance to win that which she most desired—their childish affection. Therefore the boyishness of Little Knight's speech, the look of hopeful appeal shining in his blue eyes, coupled with his natural charm of manner, went straight to the motherliness in the Queen's heart. It gave her a strange joy that was akin to pain. How long it was, how long, since childish faith had so voluntarily appealed to her aid!

"Coax him, child, of course we shall! We will go to him together!" and Little Knight's radiant smile repaid her, as she arose impulsively to accompany him.

CHAPTER VI

LITTLE KNIGHT'S TALISMAN

HOOTMAN in reception-day regalia, gorgeous with its profusion of gold lace, held aside a heavy crimson velvet curtain and Little Knight was ushered into the Audience Chamber.

It was larger than any hall he had ever seen, and from where he stood on the threshold, the broad strip of crimson velvet carpet which ran straight down the center of the polished floor to the foot of the Throne, looked to him a mile long; but he knew, of course, it could not be nearly that length! At the far end the room swelled out in circular shape, forming an immense bow window, which was divided into twelve long, narrow frames, where rich stained-glass designs, representing scenes of the chase, the principal events in religious and political history—four windows to the group—were inset, instead of the usual plate-glass panes. A row of stained-glass windows was also along either side of the room, built high up in the wall, as though the roof of this hall loomed above the surrounding portions of the palace. The part of the walls nearest the floor was paneled in elaborately carved ebony, to which crimson velvet hangings, draped at intervals, doubtless concealing other doors, gave a pleasing touch of color and richness.

The far end of the room was surmounted by a dome,

directly under the center of which the Throne was erected. It was a beautiful piece of workmanship, of carved ebony inlaid with gold and precious stones, o'er canopied and draped with heavy crimson velvet, with deep gold fringes. Three steps mounted to a platform four feet in depth, then another step led to one more spacious, on which was placed the magnificent double Throne chair.

The King was still seated on the Throne, and wore his reception robes, although the closing hour was passed. Scattered about everywhere were plants, small tables and chairs—chairs of all sorts—deep, velvet-cushioned ones, others massive carved ebony, and slender gilded affairs, which surely, Little Knight thought, the King himself would never think of sitting upon, they looked so frail. As he walked down the crimson path his heart beat excitedly, his cheeks flushed and his eyes glowed like blue stars; but His Majesty had only one glimpse of them, for they were quickly lowered as he stopped at the foot of the Throne.

"This is our belated guest," said the Queen, and smiled up at the Monarch, who gave her a quick smiling glance in return, then said gravely:

"Her Majesty has told me of your mission. Come hither, my lad, and let us hear all about it."

Little Knight mounted to the upper platform and placed his hand in the outstretched one of the King's, while he knelt as a young knight in allegiance. As he rose to his feet, he began, in answer to the questioning gaze he met:

"It's about going into the forest, Your Majesty," and as he noted the dawning look of surprise on the kingly countenance, he hurried on, relating, explaining, and in

a few minutes his earnestness overcame his embarrassment; he told the King and Queen all his childish dreams, from the time his father had gone on the Quest for the Magic Jewel of the Forest—the dreams which had grown into a settled purpose with the passing of the years. All his hopes and fears, he told them—his sorrow for the Little Princess—revealing unconsciously, how he had made a dream companion of her; and they listened with an attention so absorbed, so flattering, as to have turned the heads of most grown people, but which did not seem strange to Little Knight, who was yet a child at heart, spite of the grave mission he desired to undertake; and to children many things are matter-of-fact which seem strange indeed to those who are shut out of the Land of Faith.

As he talked a yearning expression gradually stole into the Queen's face. She leaned forward, her eyes shining, her whole figure in a posture of intense listening, elbow on the arm of the chair, her glowing face upheld by her slim jeweled hand. The King avoided her glance; he had risen and was walking back and forth, back and forth before the Throne, while Little Knight, turning as he turned, facing him always, told his story.

The King was surprised that he gave the lad's project so much consideration. Why should he, for a moment, fancy there could be anything but a refusal to such a lad, a mere child, undertaking so dangerous a mission. One in which whole armies for centuries had been of no avail! The boy's enthusiasm had infected him. Yet how absurd!

As for the Queen, as Little Knight talked, she lost sight of his youth; not the boy, but the fearlessness, the confidence he represented, was in her mind. Hope again

whispered to her heart, hope never so strong, she thought, as now. Already she saw him starting out—nay—saw him returning, her darling by his side.

Little Knight, his story ended, felt his pulses beginning



“As he talked a yearning expression gradually stole into the Queen’s face.”

to bound again in feverish excitement. He, too, saw himself on his way to victory, when the King’s voice broke the spell.

He mounted the steps, and stooping, laid his hand on

Little Knight's shoulder. His voice was low—and kind, oh, so kind—neither the boy nor the mother could help but feel his answer was reluctant, and hurt him as much as it did them. Hope died in the mother's breast; she wondered, dully, how she could have forgotten that other woman, even for a moment! Then once more came the boy's clear treble, calm, sweet—and spite of her, her heart leaped again.

"Your pardon, Sire, but my mother knows and approves. It is as much her wish as my own." He felt it did not seem right for him to persist when His Majesty was so determined; he well knew that kings were not often so considerate in their refusals, and yet he was so confident; so was his mother—his going meant so much to him, to them, to everybody in the Kingdom—and the forest! And before the King could speak he continued: "I know you will not refuse this—I have kept it ever since—that day—" his voice broke with eagerness, as with a quick movement he took a small box from his bosom and placed it in the astonished Monarch's hand.

Almost as eagerly as Little Knight the Queen awaited the outcome. She did not know what the box contained, but by this time her sympathies were all with him, and she longed for the granting of his request. She leaned forward with bated breath as the King untied the ribbon, and lifting the lid, disclosed a small but perfect rose, pink-tinted. Her face grew white.

"The fairy rose!" she murmured. The King, scarcely less agitated, handed it to her.

Had the surly soldier peeped into the Audience Chamber just then he never would have been able to keep his mouth shut, for the King sat down beside Little Knight

on the steps of the Throne, and drew him close to him as he asked:

"Tell me all about it." And in a few brief words Little Knight related the incident.

The Queen talked to him, as she had to no one save the King, about the Little Princess.

"She said something that evening about a little knight 'who looked so pleased shining out of his eyes.' I've often wondered what she meant, now I know! I did not question her then, we were so tired, and I thought we would have plenty of time to talk things over on the morrow——"

Little Knight's face was scarlet—with delight that the Little Princess had known, after all, how much he thanked her, and with a shyness born of the tender praise in the Queen's voice. He had never told any one that the Little Princess had called him "Little Knight," it seemed so wonderful and sweet to him—and true—for he meant to be her little knight in reality.

Meanwhile the King was thinking as he again paced before the Throne. His little daughter knew that anyone who rendered her a service such as had this noble little fellow, would be amply repaid—never before had she given a rose on impulse, or as a reward, and it did, indeed, seem strange that in this, the only instance in which she had done so, it should be returned with a petition in her own behalf! That the mother, too, was willing that her son should undertake such a mission, was more than wonderful. He began to believe that Providence must have inspired the child's action, the mother's conviction in her brave boy's victory! And the rose seemed to bring his brown-eyed darling nearer; it was almost as though

they had clasped hands across these fathomless two years.

All these things combined to make the Monarch disregard his practical wisdom. He turned suddenly to Little Knight:

“My boy, your wish is granted.”

“Oh, thank you, Sire——”

The King held up his hand——

“Nay, ’tis I who must thank you!”

CHAPTER VII

NIGHT IN ~~THE~~ ENCHANTED FOREST

THE dreaded interview was over—and how gloriously it had ended! As Little Knight skipped along on his way home, his heart was as light as a feather. His Majesty had been on the point of ordering the Royal Equipage to send him home in state, but he explained to him that he thought secrecy would be one of his best safeguards against the forest people—he had thought over so many things in the years of his planning—and a carriage would create all sorts of excitement in the Outer Circle, just on the enchanted borders; this explanation had deepened the Monarch's trust in him, and forestalled any suspicion which might have crept into his mind after the boy was gone, that he was dreaming dreams of glory, and the excitement of the departure over, his courage might fail him.

He and his mother went to the palace next day to settle things, for it was a condition insisted upon by the Royal couple that his mother should work no more. That assurance had removed Little Knight's last care and would prove a consolation to him, even should he, like those countless others, vanish in the enchanted region, never more to return.

The day following he set out to the forest to bring in his load of fagots. He took a lunch with him, for

he intended to explore the forest deeper than he had ever dared before, and when he had gone as far as he could, to give himself time to return for tea, he would climb the highest tree he could find and take a survey of the forest. This would give him some idea of its general layout and enable him to make a more advantageous start.

The sun was shining brightly, the birds were singing, and the little stream seemed to be dancing along for very joy that spring was come, and threw up a thousand sparkles from its little crinkled ripples.

Though he set briskly about his work, his "wood pile" did not grow very fast; there seemed to be an unusual dearth of twigs in the territory over which he usually ranged, but he did not mind that; nothing seemed to bother him much since the King had granted him that longed-for permission.

"I'll leave the twigs here for another time," he thought; "there ought to be any amount of nice dry ones farther on, as no one has gathered any for centuries, unless, maybe, the Gnomes and Giants. I'll gather a little bunch every here and there going, so all I'll have to do when I'm coming back will be to pick them up." So on he went, following the streamlet's course, gathering his fagots at short intervals and piling them under some tree or big rock which stood out distinct from the others, so that he would lose no time hunting for them on his return. They were so plentiful he soon had as many as he could carry.

He did not feel lonely, the stream kept up such a pleasant murmur; the birds flew twittering through the trees, whose leaves rustled lazily in the soft breeze, and

during the last half hour an impertinent little squirrel with a bushy, white-tipped tail, popped out before him every now and then, and ran along chattering noisily; then just as Little Knight thought he could catch him off he would go with a saucy flirt of his tail up some great tree, and Little Knight would stop to talk to him as he scolded at a great rate from a limb above.

"I don't want to harm you, Mr. Bushytail, I was only going to stroke your back and bid you the time of day, so you needn't have run like that!" he said, laughing with ringing boyish pleasure as the squirrel did this for perhaps the fifth time. Then on again he went by the brookside. Suddenly he stopped in blank surprise; the little stream that had danced along so lightly with a quiet, friendly murmur, keeping him company on his way, now lashed itself into fury among a labyrinth of rocks which seemed to have been seethed up from the bowels of the earth, and with a loud noise that began in a querulous purling and gurgling, which gradually merged into a muffled roar, which in turn seemed to die away in far, far depths, vanished beneath a great gray towering rock that loomed above him higher than the King's palace.

For a moment Little Knight's heart stood still—he felt so alone, so forsaken, as if a trusted friend had suddenly deserted him. He caught himself straining his ears to catch the sound of his playmates' voices, and felt how foolish he was to expect such a thing; he remembered how long it was since he had heard the last faint shout, and he had been walking ever since; he had not missed the sound of the merry voices so much with the little stream prattling to him, but now, despite the sullen roar of the waters, the forest seemed awesomely quiet.



“I don’t want to harm you, Mr. Bushytail.”

Instinctively he turned to retrace his steps when he saw Mr. Bushytail sitting up not two yards from him, gazing at him with bright alert eyes. He looked so cute, and so familiar, that Little Knight forgot to be lonesome, and laughed.

“So you followed me, did you? Well, don’t run away again, there’s a good fellow!” But Bushytail paid no heed to his coaxing; he darted off, and Little Knight, instead of turning homeward, ran in pursuit of him. Every now and then the squirrel stopped to chatter tauntingly to him, then as he was just about to catch up with him scampered off again. They kept at this game quite awhile, till again was heard the tinkle of water; they had come

to another stream, and here Mr. Bushytail, like his first friend, but with a little less noise, suddenly vanished. Little Knight watched the white tip as far as he could see it through the branches of the great tall tree he had chosen as a refuge; then realizing all at once how tired he was, he threw himself down to rest on the moss. He took off his hat, put both arms up under his head and lay lazily peering through the leaves at the patches of blue sky. Little white clouds sailed slowly by; he fancied them angels, boats, warriors, and lions with great manes—one after the other, one after the other they floated on, lazily, across the blue, and drowsier and drowsier his eyelids fluttered; soft breezes stole by, gently laving his temples; Mr. Bushytail crept down from his leafy den and looked curiously at the recumbent figure of his merry comrade—but he did not notice him—the blue eyes were closed—Little Knight Brave was fast asleep in the enchanted forest!

How long he slept he never knew, but it must have been through the whole sunny afternoon, for when he awoke the sun was glinting in under the branches from the west, instead of shooting down through them from straight above. For a moment he did not know where he was, but his brain soon cleared and he started to his feet in dismay. It had taken him the whole morning to come this far; it would be long after dark before he could reach home. He started at a lively gait along the sedgy banks of the little stream, fancying it must be the same that crossed the Outer Circle a couple of miles on the other side of his home; but he was mistaken; every step was taking him farther into the forest. At last when the sun had quite set, leaving only a deep red in the sky, he be-

came convinced of this. He had thought of nothing but the squirrel the latter part of his morning's journey and so had lost his bearings altogether.

Every here and there he went into the woods a little distance hunting for a tree from which he might locate the City of Circles. Finally he found one which seemed to him the tallest he had ever come across; straight as an arrow it shot toward the heavens, till its green top waved triumphantly high, high above its fellows; it was just what he wanted, and determining to wait till dark, when the city would be brilliantly lighted, he seated himself at the foot of the old forest monarch. How hungry he was, and how good his lunch tasted! He had been so excited by the unusual happenings of the last two days that he had not been able to go to sleep till long past midnight—that was the cause of his untimely nap of the afternoon, and now he was so refreshed that had he only known the way, he would have set out for home. As he sat waiting for the dusk to deepen, the whole bewildering run of events, from his walk to the palace, his meeting with the Queen, up to the present moment, passed through his mind; so profound was his meditation that at first when a peculiar, long-drawn howl reached his ears as from a far distance, he paid not the slightest attention to it; but when the sound was repeated, and seemingly much nearer, he awoke to the fact that he was in the enchanted forest, and that the material, if not the magical, dangers were beginning to make themselves known. Because he did not consider himself launched on the Quest was no guarantee that the inhabitants of the place would not molest him! He must seek shelter in the tree!

“I shall camp right here till morning,” thought he,

as he settled himself as comfortably as he could among the branches. He felt glad he had slept that afternoon, forgetting that if he had not done so he would probably be safe at home ere this. "I'll have to keep awake all night for it won't do to risk a tumble," and then that very catastrophe nearly did happen, for at that moment there was a flutter of wings above him, and a little twittery voice said:

"Little Knight Brave!—is it really you! I declare, I could scarcely tell whether you were a boy or a branch I had never noticed before, when I peeped out to see what caused the noise and saw you sitting here," and the startled boy could hardly believe his senses—it was a robin who was speaking!

"Oh—good evening—Mr. Redbreast, I am sorry if I disturbed you," he managed to say.

"Disturbed me—you don't know how glad I am you happened to stop in this particular tree! But you must not be so formal with me; to you I am plain, every-day Robin—but suppose you come in and spend the night with us? You might doze off you know, and even if you broke no bones I'd hate to think of your falling down there—" with an expressive flap of his wings.

Little Knight gazed at him in astonishment. Did he appear so small in the bird's eyes? He had always thought that even a baby would seem like a giant to such tiny creatures. He felt embarrassed. He did not want to seem rude or ungrateful, yet how could he explain to his good little friend?

Robin noted his hesitation, he trilled a little laugh, and there was a humorous look in his eyes as he said:

"You are thinking you could stow me and my family,

nest and all, into your pocket just as easily as not—" then his tone became grave. "Some boys have done that with birds and their homes, but not any you could influence, dear Little Knight Brave. And as to the question of your being too big, we'll soon remedy that if you'll honor us by coming."

"Why, if it's at all possible, I'll be only too glad," said Little Knight gratefully; "I would have to stay awake all night if I remained here, and I know I'd feel pretty stiff and sore in the morning. But before I go with you I had better climb to your observatory and see if I cannot locate the city while it is lighted up at night."

Robin Redbreast looked at him compassionately.

"You can't see it from here, Little Knight," he said, "so there is no use climbing; but in the morning, if you like, I will fly along with you and do my best to show you the way."

"Oh, will you! That's a good fellow! How glad I am that I did pick out this tree! I shall call him Mr. Lucky-tree——"

"I'm sure he's honored having you as a guest. And now are you ready to get into the nest?"

"Ready! I'm so weary—and you won't mind if I say *curious*, too—that I can scarcely wait till you show me what to do—if you're sure I won't crowd you!" dubiously.

"No fear of that. Just climb up and get as near to it as you can—so—and now—" Robin spread his wings and fluttered over Little Knight's head, twittering madly; then gave him a rap on his head, his arms, back, legs and feet, repeating:

“Cheep, cheep,
Tweet, tweet,
Head and back, hands and feet;
Tap here,
Rap there,
Too big yet, but don’t despair.
Tap toe,
Rap ear,
Growing smaller, never fear.
Arms and legs, head and breast,
Grow to fit the Robins’ nest.
Obey me, mortal, while I speak!
Cheek, cheek,
Tweek, tweek!”

Little Knight felt a queer pulling up and pulling down, pulling across and pulling over—the bird alighted beside him on the branch, and he was amazed to find he looked quite big to him. He looked down at his own toes—how near they were!—and how very small his feet had grown! Like a five-cent doll baby’s, and suddenly remembering a remark he had heard their friend, the washerwoman, make, he said:

“Talk about a pound of soap after a hard day’s washing!”

At the sound of the queer though clear treble voice, both Little Knight and Robin burst into a fit of uncontrollable laughter, the one merry trills, the other merry peals.

“It really startled me, it sounded so unexpectedly—little!” said Little Knight.

“I suppose the one you usually carry round would knock you out of the tree, now, even if you could hold it, which I doubt, it is so voluminous,” answered Robin, as

he whisked a tear of mirth from his eye with a feather, "and now, catch hold of my wing and we'll be inside in a minute!"

"Mother, here is Little Knight Brave come to spend the night with us," he announced as they plumped down in the nest that looked large and roomy to Little Knight now, and five pairs of eyes stared at him in amaze; but only for a moment, then a matronly little bird who, he guessed, was Mrs. Robin, came forward with a pleasant ruffling of feathers exclaiming cordially:

"Little Knight Brave—how glad I am to have you here! Have you told him how much we owe him, Robin?"

"If I ever did anything for you, we are even to-night," remarked Little Knight, taking the claw she extended to him in his little bit of a hand, and bowing to her.

"I haven't told him yet; I wanted to surprise him." There was a twinkle in Robin's eye. "Come here, children." The bunch of animated feathers on the other side of the nest separated, and four little birds stood decorously before Little Knight and nodded in turn, as Robin sang:

"Chub-chub and Flip-flap,
Chip-chap and Cherry."

There was something familiar to Little Knight in the way the second little bird, Flip-flap, cocked his head when he was presented, and he turned to him again when the introductions were over; the little fellow made the same peculiar motion and Little Knight started in surprise:

"It's never—Saucy!" cried he.

"That's who, Little Knight," said the little bird. And wasn't there rejoicing and excitement in the nest!

It seemed that wild little Flip-flap, unheeding his mother's warning to wait till his wings were stronger before flying far from the nest, had one day been enticed by the bright weather to fly on and on, till at last he flew out of the forest altogether, only to discover that he was so tired he could scarcely move, even had he known the way back home again. In this condition he was easily captured by the Bad Boy of Little Knight's neighborhood, who was on the point of giving him to the cat when Little Knight appeared and rescued him. Flip-flap, who had been more frightened than hurt, soon rallied, and wishing to please the little friend who had been so kind to him, acted as clever as he knew how. Little Knight grew so fond of him in the few days he was with him that he hated to set him free, but as soon as he was able to fly he took him into the forest as far as he dared, and with a last caress let him go back to his native haunts.

Now they would have talked all night, only Mother Robin reminded them they would have to get up early in the morning, as their friend Silvertip was to call soon after breakfast.

"Silvertip—is he a squirrel?" inquired Little Knight eagerly.

"Yes," said Flip-flap, "the end of his tail is white, that's why he is called Silvertip."

"Silvertip the Scout, is his full title," informed Robin. "In the forest, as in the city, Little Knight, we have to have our laws and regulations; and now since not only wild beasts but worse, live here, we find it very convenient to know as much of what is going on as we can

possibly find out, without being found out ourselves; hence the scouts—and Silvertip is about the best of them.”

“Oh, he must be my Mr. Bushytail!” and Little Knight related his race with the tantalizing fellow. “Only for him I might never have been here,” he wound up, generously forgetting that only for him he might now be at home. The birds were pleased that he had made Silvertip’s acquaintance, and sat talking quite awhile, till Mother Robin again warned them of the flight of time, and soon each little robin had its head under its wing, while Little Knight, tucked in comfortably among them, slept as sweetly as if he, too, were a bird in its nest.

CHAPTER VIII

SILVERTIP THE SCOUT

NOW strange and beautiful to wake there amid the swaying branches, to dip his face in the cool water in the acorn bowl which Silvertip had fixed for him on the bough at the edge of the nest! Then they gathered around Father Redbreast and joined in the anthem of praise and thanksgiving to their Creator which was ascending from every tree in the forest, it seemed to Little Knight. His clear treble chimed in very well with the voices of his little friends, for, though the robins do not sing as do the larks and nightingales, their chant would have been missed from the melody.

And such a breakfast as Little Knight ate, with a toadstool for a table, and wild-rose petal dishes piled high with crystal honey, wild strawberries and the kernels of all kinds of nuts—Silvertip's donation—washed down with an acorn cup of freshly gathered dew! It might seem rather slim for a growing boy—that is, a boy growing larger every day, as Little Knight had been yesterday, but to a boy who had turned things topsy-turvy, and had grown so very much smaller, it was amply satisfying.

In the talk that followed, Little Knight learned that the Little Princess and the Magic Jewel really had been stolen by the Gnomes, but where they were secreted Robin

could not say, though the robins had always liked the human family, and had tried their best to find out something about their stolen treasures.

At the time the Magic Jewel was taken, the Gnomes had held a great feast in their Stronghold—immense caverns in the heart of the mountains—and one of the Red-breast's ancestors, Robin the Bold, had concealed himself in a bush, one of several used to decorate the hall, and had



“Such a breakfast as Little Knight ate!”

thus been carried in and was present during the banquet. He had astutely chosen the bush with the most leaves but fewest flowers; it was placed between two which were a mass of blossoms, and the guests, consequently, passed it by with a glance, to hover admiringly around its more beautiful neighbors, so he had escaped detection. Greatly to his disappointment he did not learn where the Magic Jewel was kept, but two things he did find out: that their

spells were renewed every May Day—and that any one who should succeed in spending one night in the forest without coming under the Gnome King's spell would be an enemy to be feared.

"May Day! Why, that's to-day!" exclaimed Little Knight, startled.

"That is to-day," repeated Robin, nodding, "and you, Little Knight, are the first who has escaped their magic snares, the first to succeed in passing one night of freedom in the forest since it has been under their enchantment!" Little Knight was much excited.

"Robin the Bold was a smart fellow," he exclaimed in admiration, "but I wonder if last night will count in my case? You know I am not on the Quest yet—I expect to return home to-day and set out about a week from now."

The little birds, who had grouped themselves about the speakers during the conversation, looked at each other uneasily. Robin gazed meditatively at his toes a full minute, then raising his head said:

"Well, my boy, I think that last night does count, under any circumstances; whether you were on the Quest or not, does not matter; you have spent one night in the forest and the Gnomes have not trapped you—but—why not keep on instead of turning back?" Little Knight looked startled; the idea of doing such a thing had not entered his head.

"My mother," he exclaimed; she was his first thought.

"She knew you were bound for the forest; she will surmise something has turned up which has made you think it better not to return. It will save her the pangs of

parting—" then he went on to explain to him that Silvertip, knowing he intended to start on the Quest soon, had yesterday purposely lured him too far into the forest for him to return. His chances were better, now that he was so far on the road, than they might ever be again; at the approach of May Day he had been scouting in every direction learning all he could to aid him, though since Robin the Bold's strategy the squirrels, as well as the birds, had been confined by the Gnomes' magic within a certain limit of the forest. They had divined there was a spy present at the feast but could not learn certainly whether from Birdland or Squirreldom, so the squirrels had been sufferers, too, " but here is Silvertip to speak for himself," Robin suddenly exclaimed.

"I must first ask Little Knight to forgive me for meddling in his affairs," said a strange guttural voice, and Little Knight, looking in the direction whence it came, saw his friend, Mr. Bushytail, sitting on the bough with his back to the tree, his bright eyes twinkling upon him, the silver tip, which had given him his name, just showing above his head.

"Forgive you! I'm beginning to wonder how I can thank you for taking so much interest in them."

"It was not altogether unselfish at first, Little Knight, but having learned all about you from Master Flip-flap here, and after having seen you myself, I think I would have aided you anyway. But you must know your success will free us, too. Until Robin the Bold, an ancestor of our good friend Robin, got us all into trouble, the squirrels, unlike the Redbreast family, did not take much interest in what went on in the forest, or what happened to the people of the Kingdom, who hunted us to make pot-

pies. Naturally it doesn't make much difference to one whose table he graces, when he does it in the shape of potpie; and really the Gnomes 'bagged' fewer of us than the Kingdom people, so we were satisfied to let well enough alone. But after our territory was narrowed, we began to take notice and are now as heartily against the Gnomes as their bitterest enemy could wish. I came this morning, though, to advise you to start on the Quest. I have scouted around some, and find danger signals pretty thick all along the entrance to the forest. Speaking plainly, you will probably never reach home if you try to return now without the Magic Jewel. If you forge ahead, you are making a great gain. To begin with, you are the first of your race ever to have passed a night in the shades of these trees without coming under the magic spell, ever since that spell was incanted five centuries ago. To continue, you are more than an ordinary day's journey in the forest. The last day of the 'Year of the Magic Spell,' the Gnomes, knowing all the extra work they have to do, are more off their guard than at any time during the year. Your lucky star must have sent you skirmishing yesterday; I could scarcely believe my eyes when I saw you, as I knew you had intended to make some further preparations before you started; but knowing all I did, I determined to lure you on, trusting to chance to sometime explain my motives, which were not all due to mischief, eh? I brought you by short cuts you would be unable to travel again, even to-day, for the Gnomes are at work now all along the borders of the forest. I anticipate very little or no trouble from them for you, until their outposts are guarded; that will give you another day's travel toward the goal."

Little Knight's heart beat almost to suffocation as he listened. He was thinking earnestly of the plan they proposed, and concluded to take their advice. His mother, he knew, would surmise something near the truth; what he most regretted was his new outfit. But they all assured him his present forest toggery, which his mother had made specially for his rambles, was the best he could have. Robin reminded him of how he had mistaken him for a branch of the tree the night before.

And indeed, as Robin said, Little Knight was hard to tell from the forest verdure. His suit, which consisted of a cape, doublet and breeches in the same style as the clothes he had worn on his visit to the Palace, was of forest-green with trimmings of old wood shades. His linen, too, was dyed the old wood color, and his hat, of the peculiar forest green, had a middling broad brim which curved slightly downward, caught up on the left, almost at the back, by a rosette of the old wood shade; the crown of a sort of beehive shape, though not very high, was yet deep enough to pull down a good distance over his face, if necessary, almost concealing it. Thus when he sat down with his cape around him, he might easily be mistaken for a bit of forest growth. Altogether it was a picturesque costume, but the uniform the King was having made for him was on the same style, and of the same forest shades, and Little Knight could not help regretting it and the fine new gun and other knightly accoutrements; but his was a happy nature, and he made the best of it.

Silvertip rejoiced him by volunteering to carry some token to his mother, though what it should be puzzled them till Chub-chub suggested tying his handkerchief

round the squirrel's neck. He lamented that it was not very clean—he had used it as a towel—but Mrs. Robin, with motherly intuition, assured him his mother would like it all the better for that!

Then Robin told him that the gift of understanding the bird language was conferred upon him forever, and upon any companion he might wish to bring to see them so long as the visit should last. He also taught him the words to repeat to become as small as he now was, and to make others so, though he could only give him that power for use when he wished to visit the birds in their nests—if he could have made it for all times and places how much easier Little Knight's mission would have been!

The words were those Robin had used the night previous. They were to be spoken as rapidly as possible and accompanied by the appropriate taps, and, for this particular charm, must be repeated in the bird language; but Little Knight was accustomed to memorizing his lessons at school, and learned the verse so quickly they were all delighted.

“It won't sound so pretty, though, when I get my other voice back,” said he. “I suppose we'll be scared enough to fall out of the tree, when I grow up again!”

Silvertip then came forward, waving his tail majestically, and said: “I, too, Little Knight, confer upon you the same privileges—you will always find a welcome in Squirreldom!”

“Oh, goody, goody!” cried all the little Redbreasts, while Silvertip, suiting the action to the words, twirled Little Knight round and round, and tapped him on the head and feet as he chattered:

"B-r-r-r-r-l,
 B-r-r-r-r-l,
 G-r-r-r-r-l,
 G-r-r-r-r-l,
 Everything is in a whirl,
 Round about,
 About and round,
 From toe to top,
 From top to ground!
 B-r-r-r-r-l,
 B-r-r-r-r-l,
 G-r-r-r-r-l,
 G-r-r-r-r-l,
 I charge you, mortal, while you twirl,
 Assume the right size of a squirrel!"

Ere this ceremony was finished the sun was up, and they felt he must leave, and all chattered, and twittered, and talked, as fast as they could, pretending to be cheerful. Little Knight climbed out of the nest and as soon as he touched the bough became the Little Knight Brave of yesterday; he could scarcely believe the nest was so small as it looked from his very own size. Tying the handkerchief round Silvertip's neck created a timely diversion.

"We won't say good-by, I'm going to come back soon you know, and then we can visit each other often," Little Knight said, starting to descend. This was applauded with a great flapping of wings, while Flip-flap executed a hop, skip, and jump all along the bough.

He was half down the tree, when there was a great excitement and fluttering in the nest.

"Little Knight, Little Knight!" called Chub-chub loudly; he was about to return when Mrs. Robin said:

"No, no; stay where you are; it's bad luck to come back. I'll go to you." Robin and Silvertip looked at each other, and smiled in a superior way at this superstition of the weaker sex, but secretly they were glad she thought of it, as it was just as well not to run any risks. So Little Knight waited, and the whole family came down. Mrs. Robin held a soft, bright bunch of something peeping out from under her wing, which, when she reached Little Knight, she gave to him.

"It's a feather from the breast of each one of us," explained she, "and when you are in great danger, dear boy, only extreme danger, mind you, use it, just as it is."

"How shall I use it?" asked he, as he took the little bunch which looked for all the world like a doll baby's feather duster.

"That we cannot tell you, as we do not know ourselves; but do not forget it when you are in peril," said the little bird solemnly. "It is a tradition in our family that a bunch of feathers, one from the breast of each member of any one Robin family, if they pluck it themselves, for that purpose, will be of great aid to any mortal to whom the bunch may be given, the first time he is in peril after receiving it."

Little Knight thanked them warmly. Silvertip was to go with him to the line of their domain, and soon, with a final wave to the nest in the tree, they hurried on, and were lost to sight in the tangle of green.

Silvertip told him he had heard the Gnome King intended to marry the Little Princess when she grew up; this was good news to Little Knight; he felt the little girl would be safe, if he could find her, for she had quite a long time yet to grow up in.

They had spoken in whispers and ceased talking altogether as they neared the magic line. It was a mere ribbon of water which Little Knight could step across, and Silvertip could have left behind him with one bound, but the other side meant death to him, as was proven by the numerous piles of bones, which had belonged to the foolish and rash little birds and squirrels who, like Flip-flap, fancied they knew better than their parents, and, despite the grewsome proofs on the other side, thought the Gnomes' magic would not affect them.

So the two friends parted at the Magic Line, going in opposite directions, each turning resolutely and forging on alone toward his separate goal.

CHAPTER IX

GIANT OWLEYES THE WISE OF WHITE OWL CASTLE

AS Little Knight fared forth after Silvertip left him he felt very sad and lonely, but by and by, as the sun mounted higher, and he struck another little stream which rippled and purred along much as had his old friend near the forest entrance, his heart and step grew lighter. His meditations, too, served to brighten him. The longer he thought of it, the better satisfied he became that he had taken his little wood friends' advice. He missed their gay songs and lively chatter sadly; the thought of the spell which bound them made him only the more ardent in the cause. He wondered where those others who had gone on the Quest were; perhaps bound in caverns or subterranean depths over which he might even now be walking! How much happiness his regaining the precious gem meant!

About an hour or two after noon he began to feel hungry, and set himself to hunt up something to eat. He had been by no means oblivious to his surroundings as he wandered; no smallest thing escaped him; he was on the alert to-day, Silvertip would have found it an impossible task to lure him into his byways. He had discovered that the path by the brookside had been, apparently, recently used. There were freshly broken boughs, and trodden flowers and grasses. He thought of

the howls of the previous night when he first noticed them, but later came upon a pile of charred sticks and smoke-blackened stones which he knew must have been gathered by hands, not paws, and concluded the Gnomes had made it their stopping place on their road to guard the outposts. He poked around through the ferns and reeds by the brook near this spot, and was delighted to bring to view half a loaf of bread which the little people had overlooked or thrown away. How he did enjoy it! He had found some wild strawberries farther back which he carefully carried in a poke made of a big burdock leaf. Nuts were around everywhere and groups of honey-locust trees grew here and there and were easily found by their delicious fragrance.

“Wouldn’t they be hopping mad if they knew they were not only too late in guarding their outposts, but had really left their enemy bread enough for his dinner and supper! It’s bully good bread, too. It’s a wonder such wicked little creatures can make anything good,” he soliloquized, as he rested and lunched in contentment by the brookside. He laughed softly at the good joke he had on them. “I’ll be afraid to eat it, if I find any to-morrow, for I suppose by that time they’ll know some one is in their stolen realm, and I’ll have to be on the lookout for traps. I won’t eat any honey pods or nuts to-day, then I won’t be tired of them. This bread will be all I’ll want.” He tied what was left of the loaf in the napkin in which he had brought his lunch the day before, strung it on his belt, under his cape, and was ready to set out again.

“It’s queer for a fellow to be journeying this way, just going on, not knowing whether he’s in the right direction for what he’s after or not, or what he’s coming

to; but I'll make for the mountains first at any rate; they are mountain people, and likely anything they want to keep safely, will be either in the mountains or pretty close to them; one thing, I must try to sleep every night, but where to find a place of safety gets me; but it's a long ways off till bedtime yet; guess I'll run across some cave or cranny among the rocks to hide in; I'm more afraid of wild beasts at night than I am of the Gnomes. Now, I think I had better strike for the shelter of the trees; I can follow the road by the sound of the water; anyway 'more haste, less speed.' "

He acted on this judgment, and found fairly good traveling, though not so speedy as on the road. In fact, this part of the forest seemed to be frequented. The undergrowth was not nearly so wild as that on the edge of the forest where the birds and squirrels remained. He felt he could not be too careful, and tried to avoid stepping on twigs, as besides the noise which might attract attention of beast or being, he could be traced by any following his steps. On this account he also kept a sharp lookout for marshy places; the ground was damp in spots as he struck deeper into the heart of the forest. There was a particularly ill-looking spot which had been covered thick with leaves upon which he was about to tread, when he noticed a snag or root lying across the top; it appeared to have been pulled from amid the leaves and thrown down by the hole which its uprooting had made; the mud which clung to it was not yet dry; Little Knight took the stick and investigated; sure enough, the leaves covered a hole filled with treacherous slime. He had just congratulated himself upon escaping from this pitfall when the ground where he had placed his foot in all con-

fidence, it looked so firm and hard, gave way; he lurched forward, and floundered knee-deep in a boghole worse than the one he had missed. He could not get out without making a great deal more noise than he liked. The leaves rustled; twigs, concealed under the mud, gave way beneath his weight, and snapped like pistol shots, for the quiet was undisturbed by sound of beast or bird. How he would have welcomed the cheery song of the robins, the chatter of the squirrels! No matter how carefully he tried to move, the sounds he made echoed and resounded as loud as would the shouts of half a dozen boys in what he was beginning to think of as the "live" part of the forest.

He had just managed to scramble to dry land, when he heard a frightful crashing of the limbs of trees, the rustling of leaves as in a storm, and the earth literally trembled with the even pound-pounding as of some great hammer striking it. What could it be? Was it a storm? he wondered.

He was so surprised he had no time to be frightened; he had barely time to wonder, when out from the trees in the direction from whence the sounds came and in which he was staring, a most hideous Giant appeared. His head, which reared among the treetops, was big and round, with short, bristling hair standing up and out in all directions upon it, thick and coarse like the bristles of a pig. His eyes were perfectly round also, with the iris, or colored part, red as fire, and were hedged all the way around by a double row of the thick bristles, which gave him an expression too frightful to be described. These bristles also covered his cheeks, lips, and chin, partly concealing the hideously large mouth, from which three long, sharp, yel-



"Quick as a wink Little Knight dropped down at the foot of the tree."

low teeth projected. He had immense hands with long nails which made them look like claws. He was dressed in the skins of wild beasts, that of a leopard being a mere patch on his back, but it was joined to two tiger skins, which were fastened in front by the paws. Tawny lion skins were draped round his loins, while his limbs were bare, his arms showing muscles which looked as if pulling up trees, or overthrowing a mountain or so would be mere child's play to him. Quick as a wink Little Knight dropped down at the foot of the tree near which he was standing, while the hideous creature stood sniffing, nonplussed. Little Knight felt safer on the ground than in the trees, for the Giant could find him with ease amid the branches.

He seemed to get angry as the minutes passed and not a leaf stirred. He began to beat about him. A shower of leaves fell over Little Knight; so much the better, thought he. But in a short time he was horrified to see the hideous creature get clumsily down on his hands and knees and begin to rake around among the fallen boughs. The frightful claw came nearer; Little Knight could barely restrain the impulse to run, but knew his one chance was perfect quiet. Not a muscle did he move, not a breath did he breathe, while the big hand glided nearer—it was almost past him, when, alas! one of the long claws caught under his cape. Quick as a flash he had it unfastened, but the horrid-looking eyes had seen the movement, and at the same time the cape hung suspended on the claw, and before he could get to his feet he was fast in the Giant's iron clutch.

"Ho!" he snarled, as he held him far above the tree-tops, and eyed him with a greedy glare. "Ho! a fine bird

for my supper! Thought you'd fool Owleyes the Wise, did you?"

"Why," said Little Knight boldly, concluding to make the best of a very bad situation, "why, sir, I had fallen in the boghole and was cleaning the mud off my clothes. Can you direct me to the Gnomes' Castle?" Owleyes stared. He had not expected such bravado from such a mouthful as this.

"The Gnomes' Castle!" said he. "If you ever had succeeded in getting there, you'd never come out again! So I'll make a stew of you this evening and save you a long journey for the same ending."

"Nonsense!" said Little Knight, though his heart was down in his shoes, "Gnomes don't eat people, bad as they are! Neither do Giants," he added, with a mock confidence, thinking that perhaps he might flatter the hideous creature into saving his life at least; but old Owleyes the Wise was not to be cajoled.

"Oh, my eye, don't they!" said he with a certain grim humor. "If you were twins I would show one of you whether they do or not, but since you are only a single slip, you'll have to take my word for it. When you see the water bubbling beneath you, just before I drop you into the kettle, maybe you won't want further proof. Why, I'll pick your bones so bare they can be used as castanets without further polishing—if the knowledge will hearten you up any! I've been beating around in the underbrush all afternoon looking for you; I thought my nose couldn't play me false, though it's many a long day since I've had a tidbit like you; those pesky Gnomes with their magic get away with every human who enters the forest," he grumbled.

"I'm so small," said Little Knight, with a forlorn hope that he might persuade the Giant to give up his idea of making him into a stew, "that I'll hardly flavor the water—I'll only leave a bad taste in your mouth."

"I'll keep you to wind up on. But you needn't begin to worry about me, Mite," with a horrid grin that made him even more repulsive; "you have troubles enough of your own just now, and I'll overlook any thoughtlessness for my welfare in your behavior! I won't hold it up against you," and he laughed with a noise that shook the trees around them.

"Oh, ho! oh, hones!

I love to hear their moans;
I'll put them in the kettle
And I'll pick all their bones.

Oh, ho! oh, hones!

There is music in their groans;
I'll put them in the kettle
And I'll pick all their bones.

I'll munch them and I'll scrunch them
And I'll crunch all their bones,
All their bones, all their bones,
All their bones, bones, bones,
I'll munch them and I'll scrunch them
And I'll crunch all their bones!"

he roared, and seemed well pleased with himself.

Little Knight shuddered; but Owleyes would have to set him down while he was making preparations for his supper, and he might escape then, though how he had no idea. It would be impossible to hide from him, he had such a remarkably keen nose, for he had known he was in the forest when he was miles distant; and as to running, one

of the Giant's strides would cover as much ground as he could in a steady five minutes' walk. He would be glad of the lift, he thought, with a wan little smile, if he could only think up some means of escape at the end of the Giant's journey, for he was going straight toward the mountains.

An hour's walk brought them into a part of the forest where all the growth was stunted, and from old Owleyes' shoulder, where he was held by the Giant's iron grip, looked to Little Knight like a dense thicket. An immense, forbidding-looking castle loomed before them. It was of solid stone, with iron doors and iron-barred windows; even from the outside the thick dust and cobwebs could be seen, like curtains, beyond the grimy panes.

There was the clang of iron bolts and chains, the massive doors swung open, and Owleyes entered. While he was outside in the sunshine, Little Knight felt hopeful, but once inside those gloomy walls all hope seemed to forsake him. The round red eyes of the Giant glowed like great balls in the murky light. He seemed so sure of his victim he did not take trouble to close the heavy iron doors, he walked through a long, jail-like corridor, turned to the right and entered a great, bare-looking room, stone-paved. It was evidently the kitchen, for Little Knight saw an immense fireplace at the other end, over which a great kettle swung on a crane; it was as big as a hogshead, and would have held half a dozen of his size. Before the grate an immense rocking-chair stood; the Giant evidently looked after his own comfort however little he thought of that of other people. At one side against the wall was a big table with a huge bowl and plate and a heavy, keen-edged knife upon it. Little Knight shuddered again

as he saw it. How hopeless was the outlook for escape from this demon!

Owleyes took him from his shoulder and set him upon the table.

"Welcome to White Owl Castle," he said with a hideous grin. Was he going to cut him up now, Little Knight wondered. But no; he wanted to tie his feet together; he made the knots so many and so tight, that Little Knight's poor little fingers never could have unfastened them, so he did not wait to tie his hands. He seemed in a great hurry to appease his hunger.

"Guess you're safe till the water boils," he said, with a chuckle of anticipation as he set him on a log near the fireplace, facing his own chair. Then he piled wood under the kettle which was already half filled with water, as Little Knight had seen in a glance when the Giant was putting him down; and as he went about his work he sang his frightful song over and over again.

When the fire was lighted and the sparks went flying up the chimney, Owleyes seated himself in the rocker and swayed slowly to and fro. The minutes passed all too quickly to Little Knight; he knew that everyone that rolled by brought the water nearer to the boiling point, and then he would be cast into the scalding depths! He thought desperately of engaging the Giant in conversation and so divert his attention from the kettle—dear knows what might not happen in even a minute's time. Perhaps the Gnomes would come; he really thought, at the moment, life under their spell would be preferable to death in that great kettle.

"You said awhile ago that the Gnomes get away with everyone who comes into the forest, Owleyes," he began

—how queer his voice sounded in the great bare room, the rafters of which were but dimly discernible in the blackness above. There was a rustle and rattle among them as if myriads of creatures had stirred; he looked up but could see nothing; “what do they do with them?” he questioned.

“What difference does that make to you,” growled the Giant; “I’ll make sure that they’ll never get you in their clutches!” For Owleyes, who could not get ahead of the Gnomes with their magic, was put into a bad humor every time he thought of them. Little Knight saw this and kept silent, while the Giant resumed his rocking and roaring the horrible verse. As Little Knight sat staring at him, he seemed to become more and more hideous. What filthy-looking hands he had; how immense they were! He had felt much as Flip-flap must have in the Bad Boy’s clutches, when he had grabbed hold of him. Poor little Flip-flap, how he would grieve were he to see him now! And all the dear little forest friends—suddenly he put his hand in the bosom of his doublet and pulled out the tiny bunch of feathers! Up to that moment he had forgotten the Robins’ parting gift and the little bird’s warning, “Do not forget it when you are in peril!” but what should he do with it? His heart throbbed excitedly.

“Bubble, bubble,” sang the kettle; the water was beginning to boil! Should he throw it into it?

“Bubble, bubble,” it sang, not with the cheery tinkle of the teakettle, but deep and sonorously, like the dirge of doom. Little Knight twirled the feathers nervously between his finger and thumb.

“Bubble, bubble”—the Giant leaned forward. The feathers twirled against Little Knight’s nose, but he did

not notice it, and when Owleyes rubbed his nose violently, then leaning back, sneezed as though he had sniffed up a pound of snuff, sneezed so that the rafters shook again, he ceased twirling them, and Owleyes sat up, eyes watering. Little Knight twirled the tiny bunch again against his nostrils—again Owleyes rubbed his nose, again leaned back, again the rafters shook with his thunderous sneeze—and then Little Knight had a glimmering of the truth—by twirling the feathers against his own nose his enemy was affected and was compelled to sneeze. So long as he kept on sneezing, Little Knight felt safe; so he twirled the feathers madly. Maybe he would sneeze himself to death!

“Bubble, bubble,” boiled the kettle.

Sneeze, sneeze, old Owleyes the Wise, and finally, with a more violent convulsion than any before, the chair tilted back on its rockers, old Owleyes’ feet lifted from the floor, over tipped the chair, making a complete somersault, and righted itself again.

Twirl, twirl,
Bubble, bubble,
Sneeze, sneeze.

Over tipped the chair again, again making a complete somersault toward the door. Oh, he must follow him! Up jumped Little Knight, forgetting his feet were tied, and almost fell; but he did not forget to twirl the dear little bunch of feathers! Halfway through the door was the chair when it righted itself that time—he must follow.

Twirl, twirl,
Sneeze, sneeze,
Bubble, bubble.

A bright thought struck him; he heard the chair tumbling along in the corridor. Leaning far over, twirling the feathers meanwhile, he picked a brand from the fire, and held it against the rope which bound his legs. There was the pungent smell of burning tar and hemp—the last strand was severed—joy! he was free. He ran swiftly to



"He carefully cut the cord."

the door—he had been twirling the feathers all the time. At the door he heard a thud as of something falling, behind him. He looked back; a great white owl was floundering on the floor; the air was thick with bats. Little Knight, even in his extremity, seeing the creature was in distress, ran back, and found its wings were tied by a thick twine around its body. In a trice he ran for the keen-edged knife which the old Giant had dropped at his

first sneeze, and stopped twirling the feathers just long enough to enable him to carefully cut the cord, then flew onward to make up for lost time, but his heart was so light it seemed to give wings to his feet, and he soon caught sight of his old enemy in the chair, which was rocking him over and over every time he sneezed. It was, ere this, clear of the castle and the thicket which surrounded it, and as the door faced what seemed a broad road, it somersaulted along, straight ahead, old Owleyes not having time to utter a word, but his sneezes had a tone of despair and agony in them.

On, on, somersaulted the chair, and on, on, ran Little Knight. Such a distance he ran! His legs were nearly worn out, his fingers were terribly tired twirling the blessed little bunch of feathers, but bravely he kept at it.

It had grown dusk from the time he had entered White Owl Castle, and he did not see a great body of water whereat the road ended, until, with a last somersault, the chair, Giant Owleyes and all, tumbled into it with a loud splash that sent the water a hundred feet into the air. There was a despairing, hideous cry that shook the earth. One last glimpse of the frightful bristle-topped head, a few ripples that circled out wider and wider, and all was still.

CHAPTER X

A MEETING AT THE BLACK POOL

LITTLE KNIGHT, almost as amazed at the sudden disappearance of the monster as he had been at his advent, stood, still as a statue, alone on the verge of the great dark lake. He was so amazed he even rubbed his eyes and looked again, before he felt real sure that the cruel Giant was gone—that he would trouble him no more; then he kissed the little bunch of feathers, and though he knew its value as a talisman was ended, put it carefully in his bosom again; he would never willingly part with it. After offering up a fervent thanksgiving for his escape, he took a survey of his surroundings.

The lake on whose shores he found himself was an immense body of water stretching beyond his sight from north to south, and from where he stood seemed about a mile across to the trees that fringed the opposite bank. Its waters were dark and forbidding; not a ripple dimpled the smooth surface. It was so still and quiet, Little Knight felt vaguely uneasy; its very serenity seemed uncanny, and he could not help wondering just how far beneath the calm expanse old Owleyes lay. He leaned over and peered half fearfully into the glassy stream, almost expecting to meet the stare of those frightful eyes; surely no water could quite extinguish their fierce glow—but no; he could not pierce the black depths. He straightened

himself with a sigh of relief, but even though he felt sure his enemy was safe at the bottom of the lake, he concluded not to stay in the vicinity of the spot where he had disappeared. He reasoned that, as the water lay in the direct path to the mountain and would have to be either crossed or circled, it would be as well to walk along the shore and see if there was a place narrow or shallow enough to ford; if it seemed to keep its depth and width he must find a place to encamp for the night, and either try to float over on a log, or begin his weary tramp around it in the morning.

The stars were already beginning to twinkle in the sky, when he turned his face southward, but he had not taken a step when he heard a sound as of the clapping of hands, and a voice from the gloom said in hoarse but jovial tones:

“Good riddance, Little Knight! I saw the whole performance, but waited till you finished your meditations to congratulate you.”

Little Knight looked bewilderedly about him, toward the ground, as the voice seemed to come from below him, but he could see nothing or nobody. Was it a trick of the Gnomes? Had he escaped the Giant's kettle only to fall under their spell?

“Ha, ha,” laughed the hoarse voice, “every place but the right one! Now try a peep under the big tree near the Oak's Rock.” It was not hard to find the Oak's Rock. Even in the dusk its white bulk shone out in silhouette, a little to the left, ahead of him, overshadowed by a great oak tree. Under this Little Knight peeped as he was bid, and saw a toadstool, a giant of its kind, from under which a great, wide-mouthed frog sat looking out



"A great wide-mouthed frog sat looking out at him."

at him. Its sides were almost bursting with the funniest laughter it had ever been Little Knight's good fortune to hear. It sounded as if a lot of croaks had been broken to pieces, then gathered together, helter skelter, and made over into a laugh. Little Knight knew it must have been the frog who accosted him, but he was still suspicious; he smiled; indeed, Gnome or no Gnome, he couldn't help smiling if he wanted to, but he made no advances until the frog stopped laughing and said in a rather surprised voice:

"Why, aren't you going to speak to an old friend, Little Knight?"

"I am only too glad to have an old friend to speak to—but where have we met before?"

"Oh, Little Knight!" said the frog reproachfully, "have you forgotten Bully, as you called me, or Croaking Bull the Jumper, of the Bad Boy's circus?"

"Not really!" Little Knight's delight was so genuine that his little friend was appeased.

"Really and truly, blackly and bluey. If that's not proof enough, just look here," and he held out one of his hind legs, around which Little Knight saw a cruel mark as if made by the deep cutting in of a cord.

"What a shame!" he cried. "Why, it came near cutting your foot off, didn't it? I thought there would be no signs of it by this time. But, oh, Bully, I am glad to see you! I was afraid at first you were only magic; you see I'm on guard against any tricks of the Gnomes."

Bully batted his eyes as he said admiringly:

"You are a long-headed one, Little Knight. Now I never thought how it might strike you; I was so sure I was I, you see. We've been on the lookout for you ever since we heard you intended to start on the Quest; we have the coast guarded," he waved both directions, up and down the lake, "ready to help you soon as you came in sight; but we were not thinking so much of the Gnomes; old Owleyes has been our particular pest; we thought he might get after you, and we stood in readiness to offer you a refuge at least, if we could do nothing more."

"Well if that wasn't thoughtful of you!" exclaimed Little Knight, warmly.

"Pooh! that's nothing to what you did for me! Rescuing me from that gang. Why, they had me nearly killed trying to jump through their old hoop and pulling me back by that string five times out of six. I thought my leg would come out—then you came and——"

"And," interrupted Little Knight, "if you hadn't been so intelligent and jumped right over to me, I don't believe I could have induced them to give you up in time to save your life; but that stunt of yours took with the boys."

"Didn't they howl! All but the Bad One. He was going to 'knock the 'tarnel lights out of you,' until you commenced to roll up your sleeves; then he saw the school-master coming and flew over back lots, with all the boys chasing and hooting him. But you were ready to fight, Little Knight, and if you had not come when you did I would not be here now."

"And how lonesome I would be then, instead of having you to cheer me up! I really can't quite believe it yet."

"Oh, if you'd seen me this two weeks! And all of us; there's not a frog in the Kingdom but loves your name. But when did you start on the Quest?"

"Yesterday morning, though I did not know when I left home that I really was starting!" and he related his encounter with Silvertip and his refuge with the robins, to Bully, who listened with the deepest attention.

"Talk of magic, why you must carry a wad of it yourself—clear to the Black Pool, and only started out yesterday morning! How, in the name of Great Granddaddy Hopperlong, did you manage it?"

"Owleyes."

"Well, isn't that the best joke of the season? Owl-eyes the Wise carried his destroyer a good day's journey through the forest! that speaks well for his wisdom!" Bully laughed till his sides again threatened to burst. Little Knight's smile was rather dubious.

"Somehow," said he, "I can't feel downright glad

about it. I never killed anyone before, you know, Bully, and it makes me feel sorry."

"Sorry! Why, hasn't he netted up frogs by the hogs-head to fill his old kettle—and which do you suppose is the worse death,—boiling water or cold? For my part, when I saw his old Bristletop going down I was only sorry it wasn't in his own old kettle of scalding hot water fizzing and bubbling up, just as he had prepared it for you. Why, you never saw such a frolic as there'll be among the frogs when they hear you not only got away from him, but with him. He's ended now with all his wicked ways, so you must jubilate and not give him one regretful thought!"

"I do feel better about it. He was a cruel old monster!" and Little Knight determined he would take Bully's advice.

"Another thing, Little Knight," said his friend, "there's not a safer spot in the forest, nor one in which you could be more welcome, than right down in Marshland, with yours always to command," and Bully hopped, with a flourish, to the top of the toadstool, and standing on his hind legs, saluted Little Knight with a courtly bow, hand over heart, like a gentleman of the old school. "Will you deign to give us the honor of your company for just as long as you possibly can?" solicited he.

"Bravo, Bully! It's a good thing you didn't show off your talents at the circus, or I'm afraid all my eloquence, tongue and fist, would not have released you. But where is Marshland? Will I 'fit' as I now am?" for since his experience with the birds he expected most anything might happen. "You don't need to be told how grateful I am nor how glad if it can be arranged for us to spend the night together."

“Except when I was relieved at mealtime, and for a little exercise, I’ve been sitting here, ever since we heard you were coming on the Quest, waiting for just this happy minute!” exclaimed Bully rapturously. “And it won’t be necessary to reduce you, as the robins and squirrels were obliged to do; we frogs are such a stirring crowd, and need such a lot of space to stir around in, that old Owl-eyes himself, once he was there, might move about in Marshland with ease; guess we’d better be getting under cover now, as the Gnomes will soon find out about the owner of White Owl Castle and make themselves promiscuous around here after this; he saved them the trouble of setting a guard over this part of the forest, and they seldom came near. Now, Little Knight, follow me.”

CHAPTER XI

A PEEP INTO MARSHLAND

BULLY hopped off the stool and headed for the Oak Rock. There he paused, and doubling up his foot, rapped with his knuckles as he chanted:

“Rock, rock,
Double knock,
Goggle Eyes
With speckled frock,
Turn key,
Open lock,
Knock, knock,
Double knock!”

Little Knight was amazed to see the apparently solid rock slowly separate in the center; each half swung back as though on a pivot, and a great frog with bulging green eyes, dressed in yellow satin breeches, a red swallow-tail coat and a pearl-colored waistcoat splashed over with great black speckles, stood blinking at them, as though the light dazzled his eyes.

“Here’s Little Knight Brave, Gog,” presented Bully, and he of the goggle eyes hopped about two feet in the air, emitting an ear-splitting croak. When he alighted, he reached forth and took both the hands Little Knight extended to him, as he exclaimed:

"By the shadow of the Good King Hopperlong! The sight of you warms my heart, Little Knight. Won't there be doings in Marshland! Step right in, gentlemen, step right in."

Little Knight saw that the rock had uncovered an opening like a well, in which was hanging a moss-lined tub, which fit the mouth of the well by all but about an inch all the way round.

"Step in and make yourself comfortable, it's all right, Little Knight," added Bully. Little Knight accepted the invitation without further hesitation, and found the cushioned bottom of the tub very grateful to his tired little body. Bully hopped after, followed by the excited Goggle Eyes, who kept talking incessantly till their tub stopped about five feet from the surface, at the mouth of what looked like a small tunnel in the side of the well, where he left them.

"He is going to close up the rock," explained Bully, "then he'll come down by the tree path; that tunnel leads over to it; there's a door in the tree and a road down from it, but this is the most comfortable entrance we have."

"I've had more pleasant surprises and adventures since I came into the forest yesterday than I ever dreamed of," said Little Knight, greatly interested in the present one; "I looked forward to the other kind, but this sort is altogether unexpected."

"I wish we could make them all pleasant, but as you go deeper into the heart of the forest, the Gnomes are more numerous and I'm afraid there are severe trials ahead of you. That sounds like a 'croaker,' doesn't it, Little Knight, but I want to put you on your guard; I



“The sight of you warms my heart, Little Knight.”

wouldn't for the world have you get a false idea of security in your mind, and I know the Gnomes will be busy at work to ensnare you as soon as they find that you have succeeded in coming this far; for you are the only inhabitant of the Kingdom who ever did reach the Black Pool since the Magic Jewel was stolen!"

"I know just how you feel, Bully; I'm sure if it depended on you my path to the Jewel would be strewn with roses; when I'm gone you must remember how suspicious I was of you, and not worry about my falling under the Gnomes' spell; I don't say I won't, but I'll tell you right here, I'm going to try mighty hard not to. But why is that big lake called the Black 'Pool?'"

"Because it was only a pool in the beginning, just after the Gnomes got the forest in their possession. You know that silvery little stream at the entrance of the forest, where you always like to play? Well, the Gnomes cast a spell over it centuries ago, and it vanishes underground in a great pile of rocks—but I suppose you came past it yesterday?" Little Knight nodded and the frog continued, "Well, it flows underground quite a distance, then appears on the surface again as the Black Pool—it was called that when it was only a pool, and the name sticks to it."

"I would never have recognized my happy, dancing little friend in those black waters," reflected Little Knight; "if the Gnomes change people that way, it must be dreadful!"

"I suppose they are unhappy enough," said Bully, then hastened to add, as he saw the cloud on his hero's face, "but we must look on the bright side, now you have come, Little Knight. You know when you get the Jewel all the

people will be freed, and everything be as it was before the spell was worked."

"I hope I will succeed." Then brightening up, he asked: "Bully, is it very wet where we're going? This well affair, you know—and I am not a very good swimmer."

Bully enjoyed that.

"And Marshland sounds sort of damp, too, doesn't it? But when it comes to swimming, you can suit yourself as to the mode—take to the water or go where that girl's mother allowed *her*; it's in one of your books——"

Little Knight laughed gayly.

"You mean that nonsense verse—

"Mother, may I go out to swim?
Yes, my darling daughter;
Hang your clothes on a hickory limb
And don't go near the water.'"

"That's it—but here we are, you can see for yourself."

Looking down, Little Knight saw a ray of light flashing over the bottom of the well, then suddenly the wall on one side widened to a short tunnel, and as the tub settled gently, the arch framed for him a bit of the oddest landscape he had ever beheld.

There was a glimpse of water, not black, as in the pool above, but sparkling, crystal clear; on the near side, grass more velvety and thick than any above ground, stretched a vivid emerald, starred by daisies, buttercups, and all the old earth treasures; on the opposite bank, which sloped gently upward, a growth of toadstools had been ranged, the smaller ones in front, taller and taller toward the back—

rows on rows of them, like tiers of theater seats. The only break in them was right in the center of the middle row, where a space had been cleared around two stools of mammoth proportions. Little Knight surmised these belonged to the King and Queen of the Bullfrogs, before Bully told him so; he also explained that at this end of the grounds the races and sports of all kinds were held.

Such a croaking as there was! It was deafening!

As soon as they stepped from the arch they were surrounded by a bevy of courtiers and dames, who, contrary to their surface habit, all walked upright and were dressed in the nobbiest of costumes of all colors and shades.

Little Knight forgot how tired he was in the novelty of the situation. He was kept busy bowing and smiling on all sides. Presently there was a rustle all down the line, the crowd parted, and a bullfrog about twice the size of Bully, followed by a stout matronly little frog who could hardly keep pace with her lord's hasty steps, came forward between rows of respectfully saluting subjects, for it was the King of the Bullfrogs himself. He wore a high gold crown, sparkling with jewels, and a purple velvet robe richly embroidered with gold. The Queen was gorgeous in a gold-colored satin gown, with a graceful purple satin over-robe, heavy with gold lace. A smaller jeweled crown bedecked her brow.

"Welcome to Marshland, Little Knight Brave!" exclaimed the Monarch heartily, "Thrice welcome! I never can express our gratitude to you for having saved our dear son's life." He took both Little Knight's hands and shook them as if he would never let them go, while Little Knight bowed and tried to make a fitting reply;

then the little Queen clamored for attention, and there was more handshaking and thanking, but finally it was over, the part Little Knight always dreaded, though the frolic of the frogs had just commenced.

When first this one, then that, came up to Bully with, "Present us, Prince, do," or, "Prince, can't you give a fellow an introduction?" Little Knight turned to his companion and said humorously:



"They came forward between rows of respectfully saluting subjects."

"I didn't know that I was hobnobbing with royalty, Prince Bully!" Bully laughed.

"Royalty yourself! There's nothing more royal than a loyal friend! But these chaps'll wear you to a mere thread if we let them! Suppose we go to your room?"

They made their way slowly through the happy crowd, who were almost crazy with delight, since they had learned that their mortal hero above heroes, Little Knight Brave, was not only among them, but that he had done away with their old enemy Owleyes the Wise of White Owl Castle,

and forgetting decorum with two legs, leaped wildly about in all directions, getting sadly tangled in their holiday furbelows; but they enjoyed it immensely! However, Little Knight was glad to leave the pandemonium.

They went to the other end of the water, which seemed to be reserved for living apartments; here were the King and Queen enthroned upon a mossy log, their courtiers and maids of honor in attendance. They all trooped to show him his room—a beautiful little bower which had been screened off expressly for him by a curtain of vines and flowers deftly and artistically woven. A great old tree stump hollowed out, draped with ivy, and cushioned with the greenest mosses, made a most comfortable chair. A bed of balsam branches covered with dried moss looked very inviting; and when he saw a loaf of the Gnomes' bread, with plenty of wild honey and strawberries spread out upon another tree stump beside the chair, he thought he had never before felt so hungry! The ground was covered with a natural carpet of the softest, greenest moss he had ever seen. When he had admired to their hearts' content, all the company left except Bully, who explained how they caught the sunshine as it filtered down through the water, and kept it for light and heat; how all the frogs except the Royal family and their attendants, who occupied this end of the land, slept under their own particular stools on the stream side; and finally, when Little Knight felt he could not eat another bite, they both found they were really too tired and worn out to stay up all night, so Bully retired to his couch just outside Little Knight's room, while he no sooner stretched himself upon his odorous balsam bed than he was far away in the Land of Nod.

There was a great clamoring in the morning when he

started. What good wishes did he not carry onward with him!

The King presented him with a shriveled little frog-skin which he bade him guard most carefully, and to make use of should any great danger threaten him; he had no idea what he must do with it or what effect it would have, but warned him not to forget it. Great Grand-daddy Hopperlong had handed it down with the injunction that the first mortal to whom the frogs might give shelter, should he be on the Quest of the Magic Jewel of The Forest, be presented with it, with those instructions. Great Grand-daddy Hopperlong had been the reigning monarch when the Gnomes stole the Jewel, and had procured the frog-skin at great peril to life and limb. So Little Knight felt that he was well fortified to face the dangers of the forest once more, especially when Bully gave him a jeweled belt of flexible steel, with a short dagger, and a canteen of wrought gold, with a jewel-studded stopper—and, oh, joy! last, but not least, a beautiful little gun! To be sure there was not much ammunition for it, but what there was had been kept safe and dry by the good little frogs. The outfit had been found about a hundred years before, all but the gun, which had been laid down and forgotten by a sleepy Gnome, near the Oak Rock, not long after Prince Bully's return to his Kingdom.

"How would you advise me to get to the other side of the Black Pool, Your Majesty?" Little Knight inquired, as Bully buckled on the jeweled belt, which wrapped twice around his lithe body.

"You won't have to cross it, my dear Little Knight, you will be on the other side when you reach the forest

again," the good King assured him, and Little Knight was so surprised and delighted, he said "he felt like hopping like one of themselves."

"Well, there's no law against that here," the King answered, laughing heartily, and Little Knight with all his boyish spirits alive, his heart singing for joy, did go hop, skip, and jump, clear to the starting point, where a great, beautifully tinted shell, fitted out with crimson velvet cushions, was anchored at the water's edge; for they were taking the water route, as Bully had explained to him on the way up. It was large enough to accommodate Little Knight and two or three of his comrades, had they been with him; when he took the place of honor as directed, with the King on one side and Prince Bully on the other, six gayly dressed oarsmen entered—they cast off anchor, and floated forth into the middle of the stream.

And yet another surprise awaited him.

The stream made a sudden turn to the east just beyond the arch from which he had gained his first glimpse of Marshland, the Kingdom of the Frogs, the night before. Beyond this curve the sunbeams had been removed, and when they rounded it in their beautiful shell boat with its garlands of ivy, the great tulips, which hung inverted like crimson Chinese lanterns among the green, suddenly glowed as if there was a real flame within them, instead of bunches of fireflies who had been only too glad to lend their services for the occasion; a crimson-clad frog in the prow lighted a cluster of cat-tails which he carried (the kind which grow in the marshes); and scarcely had he time to admire the effect of this than myriads of lights appeared on either bank, where "footmen" kept pace with the procession of boats; for now, following in

their wake, he saw dozens of boats trimmed with vines and tulip lanterns—crimson, yellow, pink, white—every shade he had ever seen a tulip grow; and each had its cluster of cat-tails flaming as well; they were filled with the nobility of Marshland and their attendants, all decked out in the most gorgeous costumes imaginable, as were those on the banks who marched in perfect order, each with his flaring flambeau, which was decorated with a bunch of bright flowers. And now, softly from the darkness ahead of them, came strains of strange but sweet music. It was the famous Bullfrogs' Reed Band, which had been sent on in a boat in advance; they carried no lights, so the effect was more striking.

"Oh!" breathed Little Knight. How fantastic, how gorgeous, how odd, yet how unspeakably lovely it was! If Mother was only with him, for he knew he could never describe it to her—it had to be seen to be appreciated; the flickering lights, the sweet music, the gayly garbed frogs, the beautifully decorated boats, even the vine-clad, flower-starred, moss-grown walls of the Kingdom, whereon the lights and shadows danced—no, they never could be described nor forgotten!

All too soon, it seemed to them, the journey was ended; the boat was lightly pulled to shore; the gold-bladed oars, dripping crystal drops back into the stream, rested in the pearly row-locks, and the whole party in Little Knight's shell disembarked, as did the one in the boat following, which was comprised of the Queen and several of her Maids of Honor.

They had landed at the foot of a flight of moss-grown stone steps, and Little Knight thanked them again and again as they shook his hand at parting.

“ I never expected a pleasure such as this,” he said.

“ But you will repeat it many times, I hope,” King Bullfrog made answer, “ I do not doubt that you will be successful in the Quest, dear Little Knight Brave, and I know you will not forget your friends of the marshes, but will come sometimes to see them; I confer upon you the knowledge of the frog language for evermore,” he continued gravely, “ and extend to you the privilege of conferring it upon any whom you wish to accompany you upon your pilgrimage to our Kingdom, for so long as the visit lasts. And now, farewell—may success and all good fortune be with you! ” There was not a dry eye when His Majesty concluded, and their chorus of good wishes to him, and defeat to his enemies—and theirs—followed him as he mounted the stairs, accompanied by Bully and Goggle Eyes, who had been a close second to the Prince where attentions were concerned. The Little Queen called after him a warning not to forget the frog-skin when danger threatened. Little Knight and his two friends scarcely spoke a word, so busy were they gulping down the great lump that each had in his throat, while Goggle Eyes fitted a tiny key to a door in the tree trunk, at the top of the steps, which Little Knight declared he never would have suspected; it opened, and they stepped forth once more into the enchanted forest.

He assured them that since he had his gun, canteen, and dagger, he felt quite safe, and they need not worry about him, and Bully said confidently:

“ Well, when we see you again the old forest will be *un*-chanted, Little Knight.” They stood watching him till he was almost out of sight—but not quite, for that might bring bad luck, and there was no use running risks!

Little Knight turned and waved to them as long as he could.

"I wish I could have gone with him," sighed Bully with a dismal croak.

"I, too," wailed Goggle-Eyes, and before they went downstairs again they had a real good "weep" in each other's arms!

CHAPTER XII

A NARROW ESCAPE

LITTLE KNIGHT made good progress that morning. It lacked but an hour to noon, and he was beginning to think he would make Craggy Heights—a bleak range of hills of which he had often read a description—without further adventure, when, passing through a lovely little grove of chestnut trees, there was suddenly a crash and crackling off to the right a few yards ahead of him; it reminded him of the arrival of Giant Owleyes; he stepped behind the nearest tree, and dropping down among the tall weeds and grasses, pulled his hat well over his face and hair, while his cape completely covered him.

To his relief, not a giant, but a splendid deer, with branching antlers and a long scar on its breast, broke from the underbrush and was off across the open and out of sight on the other side before he had time to get to his feet.

“I feel as if I had made a narrow escape, even though there was not a bit of danger,” he thought, then almost gave vent to a surprised whistle when, apparently from the far side of a giant chestnut tree a couple of yards ahead of him, he heard a cracked voice say, with a yawn:

“Old Antlers woke me up; I thought it was old Owl-eyes, sure, out of his bailiwick!”

"I don't see why the King doesn't have those animals marked," grumbled a second voice in high, nasal tones; "a fellow could take a shot occasionally, then, without fear of getting into trouble; but it's all for number one—it doesn't make any difference what he bags!"

"True! And a slapdash of good red paint would make it all right for everybody."

"I wonder if he will bag his 'bird' this time—he's a slick customer—two days over the border and nary a glimpse of him!"

"We ought to keep our eyes peeled. It would be our making to capture him! I never saw Goromogore so wrought up in my life as he was May Day eve when Tricksey brought in word that a mortal had succeeded at last in staying in the forest all night, and was still at liberty!"

"Ho-ho," they seemed to be laughing at some recollection. Little Knight knew by their talk that there were at least two Gnomes under the chestnut; they had been asleep when he had approached, and he would have walked right into their presence if it had not been for the fortunate coming of the deer. He knew also that he was the subject of the latter part of the conversation, so he pricked up his ears and listened for all he was worth.

"Poor Tricksey! Instead of the reward he expected, Goro had him collared and rushed to the guardhouse! I guess he thought he was going to be beheaded; he got as yellow as beeswax, Snorty said; and Sharpwit was so delighted he could scarcely keep from grinning."

"He's always been jealous of Tricksey, but he might know the King wouldn't do that! Tricksey's too good a scout. Runtly told me Goro's temper had cooled consider-

ably by morning, and he sent for Tricksy and apologized handsomely. That's what makes everyone stick to him; he owns up when he has been in the wrong, and there is more satisfaction in that to a person than if he loaded him with honors and kept a stiff neck! Tricksy is to make a thorough canvass to-day from the entrance to White Owl Castle if necessary, and Sharpwit is to keep a lookout nearer home; I suppose he's dreadfully disappointed! There's not one chance in a thousand of the bird's escaping Tricksy's snares, and Sharpwit will only have his trouble for his pains."

"Then there's no use in our keeping our eyes peeled, either," said the high nasal voice, grumblingly again; "nobody has half a chance when Tricksy's in the game!"

"Well, we don't have the trouble, then," said the first speaker, consolingly; "Tricksy has to work hard to keep up his reputation. At any rate, I don't think there would be much use bothering ourselves to-day." Little Knight breathed a soft but fervent sigh of relief. "If he has succeeded in eluding Tricksy, he can't have gotten any farther than the castle, and if old Owleyes' nose is not kept too busy snoring, mark my words, he'll have a 'rare-bird' stew for supper!"

"You would be made court jester sure, if the King should take a fancy for one, Squatty. Rarebird, indeed! The first that's got that far for centuries!" and the nasal voice broke into a cracked laugh.

"Except the White Owl," said Squatty, in such grave tones that even without seeing, Little Knight knew both faces had lengthened soberly; the laughter instantly ceased, and the second Gnome echoed solemnly:

"Except the White Owl!"

"Well, let's be getting on; I have to take a hand at prodding at the furnaces this afternoon," said number one.

"Wish I could change places! I have to help scrub old Hornyback. Last time he squirted some of his devil's smoke right into Hollowpate's face; he nearly strangled; he was black and blue for an hour and blind as a bat for two days!"

"You ought to be glad you escaped that, anyway!" said Squatty, again consolingly.

"So much more reason that I'll catch it to-day," grumbled the dismal one.

"I wonder why Goromogore doesn't give that job to the others?"

"He's afraid they'd put old Hornyback's working apparatus out of order; I wouldn't blame them if they did!"

"Nor I! Guess the King wouldn't either, so he's not going to give them the chance. But I tell you what, Cheerful"—Little Knight smiled as he heard the grumbling little fellow called by that name—"it's better to have that job here than to be driven back to that scrubby little old mountain we came from! Getting hold of the Magic Jewel of the Forest was the best stroke of business ever done by any of our tribe before or since—even capturing the Little Princess is nothing to it!" These remarks seemed to put new vim into Cheerful.

"That's so," said he, "I'll scrub without a murmur to-day, see if I don't! The old pet's playful ways are trying, at times, but when we think what he may do for us in an emergency, we get real fond of him, though it's not likely his services will ever be needed for that particular event! I wonder where Rarebird is now."

"In the soup," and the cracked "Ho-ho!" of their laughter rang forth again.

"Squatty, you'll be the end of me!" said the admiring Cheerful. "But if he should escape the kettle, I'm going to do the best to have old Hornyback in good shape, and he'll be a nice little tidbit for him!"

There was a sound as if they had risen, and their unsuspected auditor cautiously raised his hat brim the least bit and peeped out.

A grotesque little figure with a broad, goodnatured-looking face, had stepped into full view from behind the chestnut, and was standing facing Little Knight's direction, stretching his short arms above his head, as one does after a lazy loll. This he took to be Squatty.

The second Gnome's countenance was long and thin, with a long, hooked nose; and though, at that moment, there was an expression halfway between a frown and a smile on his face, his mouth refused to change its habitual droop at the corners; altogether he was a most discontented, sourlooking customer.

Their clothes, even to their odd-shaped shoes, were a dusty russet color. Each wore an overcape or cloak, full, and reaching almost to the knees, with a queer, high-peaked hood attached. They were of the same rusty hue as the rest of their garments, which blended in with the landscape, Little Knight observed, as well as his own of forest-green.

He expected they would turn toward the mountains, but what was his surprise, when they came onward, straight toward him! One glance in his direction when they were beside him, and he would be discovered; for though the color of his clothes was a great protection at

a distance, he could not hope that on close inspection it would shield him. His heart beat so hard and fast he was afraid they would hear it; but again there was a crash, and out bounded the same deer from the underbrush, just ahead of the advancing figures, attracting their attention at the crucial moment; they walked past, looking at the



“Stretching his short arms above his head.”

animal, which was running down the glade in front of them, and wishing they might dare a shot; they never guessed that Squatty’s cloak actually brushed the Rare-bird’s plumage in passing!—Little Knight was saved once more.

“I’ll know you by that scar you carry, and if ever I’m able, I’ll do you a good turn, old fellow,” he resolved. “Once I get the Magic Jewel you’ll be safe to die of old

age!" However, he did not stir for quite a while after the last echo of the Gnomes' voices had died away. When he did venture to look round there was not the least sign of Gnome or animal near. Cautiously he arose, tiptoed to the tree where they had rested, cautiously peeped around it: no one was there. Only then did he breathe freely.

"I'll see if they left any lunch; they are so sure I'll never reach this far, that it won't be 'magicked' and I must forage for the future whenever I get a chance." But there was not even a crumb of bread. He was about to go on his way when he caught sight of something glittering in the grass.

He stooped and picked up a steel chain about three inches long from which depended a couple of small, brown objects, which at first he took to be chestnuts; he supposed that one of the little creatures, in the idleness of the moment, had fastened them there—one at either end—and as the chain was worthless, had flung it aside when through playing with it. He had already thrown it down, when second thoughts prompted him to examine it more thoroughly; he picked it up again and stood looking it over when, for the third time, there was a crackling and crashing of twigs and branches, and once more the deer darted from the wilderness. Little Knight flew to cover behind an immense tree at the side of the little grove. The deer did not dart off, as before, but stood in the shadow of the Gnomes' tree, head raised, as though listening. Little Knight listened too, but though he strained his ears he could not hear a sound. Fully a minute elapsed, and he was beginning to think he had been needlessly alarmed, when the far-off murmur of voices broke the stillness; as they came nearer, he recognized the

cracked and nasal tones of Squatty and Cheerful, and soon they came into view between the trees. Did they suspect his presence? Had he left any clue? They advanced at once to the big chestnut under which they had rested, and under which the deer was quietly browsing. It moved off a little way at their approach.

"Do you remember when you had it last?" Squatty asked anxiously. Cheerful's sour visage was even more vinegary than before.

"Remember! Of course I remember! It was just here; I took it out of my pocket to see if it was all right, and they were both there then. It must be in the grass somewhere; it couldn't leave without feet!"

Little Knight's clasp on the trinket tightened unconsciously. How he wished he had had the presence of mind to drop it before he had run to hide!

"That's sure, if you are!"

"Didn't I tell you," began Cheerful exasperatedly, when Squatty suddenly doubled over, and hands on knees "ho-hoed" with the greatest enjoyment.

"What is it, Squatty? D'ye find it?" asked Cheerful, brightening.

"No *I* didn't, but look there!" Little Knight's heart gave a great bound; he was sure the keen-eyed Squatty had seen him, but in a moment he was relieved, for Squatty exclaimed: "But I guess Old Antlers did!" Cheerful's little eyes opened their widest, then his companion's meaning dawned upon him.

"The deer has swallowed it!" For a second he looked aghast; then he, too, "ho-hoed." "That relieves me, anyway. It wouldn't be pleasant to have it found and returned to King Goromogore. He's not any too consid-

erate to anyone he thinks has been careless; but I don't see for the life of me how I ever dropped it, nor——"

"I say, my antlered friend," called Squatty to the deer, interrupting his companion's complaints, "you had better not drink any water yet awhile, or your wings will sprout on the wrong side of you, and when you want to use them you will be put to the inconvenience of turning inside out!"

"Come on," grumbled Cheerful, "we've lost enough time already, and we'll have to take the long way back, into the bargain! What's that old buck crashing around here for anyway. I hope he'll drink the next stream he comes to, dry!"

They again started off as fast as their short, sturdy legs would carry them, but Little Knight waited as before, until the sound of their footsteps had quite died away ere he threw back his cape and addressed the deer as though it could understand him.

"You dear old deer, you! You've saved me again, for if their suspicions had not fallen upon you, they would have been sure another Gnome had found this mysterious affair, and in scouring around for him would have found me! And mind, if I get the Magic Jewel——" but the deer bounded away as if startled at the sound of his voice.

Then little Knight examined the trinket curiously. The ornaments, which looked like chestnuts, were made of metal—bronze, probably—but search as he might, he could find no way to open them.

"What did they mean by wings and water," he wondered, as putting his "find" carefully away with the frog skin and the little bunch of feathers, he marched on again, munching his bread as he went, for, like Cheerful, he felt

he had lost too much time already; his thoughts marched with him. "Maybe they become a pair of wings when they are put in water, and can be used to fly with; that would be dandy! But I won't risk spoiling the charm just to satisfy my curiosity—some day when I'm near water, and any danger threatens me, I'll see what they will do!"

He hoped to reach Craggy Heights by noon, and the summit, perhaps, by nightfall. Craggy Heights was a range of hills marking the halfway line in the forest. In the olden days travelers who had plenty of time always skirted its base, around which the main highway had branched in both directions; but those who wished to shorten the journey by a full day's length, took the rougher road, directly over the stony heights, which route Little Knight intended to try.

As he walked on, the Gnomes' conversation gave him plenty of food for thought. What was Hornyback? And the White Owl—why had they spoken of it with such solemnity? It must be the one he had released in old Owl-eyes' Castle. Evidently the precious pair did not know of the Giant's fate, but it would soon be learned, and possibly his connection with it be surmised. He must keep his eyes "peeled" for Sharpwit's snares from now on.

CHAPTER XIII

HODGE PODGE OF THICKET LODGE

HE reached Craggy Heights just as the sun, bright and cheery, looked down upon him from straight above, and with good heart started the tedious climb. And it was climbing, with a vengeance! Climb, climb, from the very base, and as far up as the eye could see. The growth of scrubby bushes and stunted trees at times aided, but more often retarded, his progress; but at all times they served to conceal him, so he was glad to have them, even though they did keep him back some. Very soon after starting he realized he would never make the summit as he had hoped—by nightfall—but, always ready to see the bright side, he only thought:

“Wasn’t it well I made such good time this morning; if my whole way had been like this, it would have taken me till night to reach the foot of the hill, and I could not venture to climb here after dark; one false step and it would be good-by, sure. I would much rather camp on the hill than down in the forest. I think I’ll be on the lookout for a cranny among the rocks to sleep in, while it’s light, and stay right there as soon as I do.”

Accordingly, whenever he saw what he thought was a promising opening between the boulders, he cautiously investigated. Finally, by merest chance, he caught sight of an opening in a dense thicket of scrub bushes, and at last

with many a scratch, and a great deal of trouble, for he wished to make as little noise as possible, succeeded in getting through it and found himself in a small clear space against the side of the hill, right in the heart of the thicket; at the farther end of the clearing a rock jutted out, and peering carefully around it he saw the yawning mouth of what appeared to be a small cave; he was delighted.

"But I had better not be too quick; maybe it's a Gnomes' doorway into the hill; though I don't think they would bother themselves with this little stony ridge when the mountains are so handy."

However, he was careful; he waited quite a while before squeezing between the rock and the bushes, and when he entered the cave crawled softly around the whole place, examining every little nook and crevice. This did not take him long, for the space was simply a shelving-in of the rocks, and was no more than six feet long, while the top rock, slanting down toward the back, met the under, or floor, rock about five feet from the entrance. He found only one disquieting thing:

The place was strewn with bones!

"I believe, after all, I'll feel safer in the open," he thought regretfully, for he had all a boy's love of a "really" cave. "This must have been the den of some wild beast; but it has not been here for a long time. The bones are all white and dried; they must be real old—and I'm sure nothing has been through that thicket, or it would be torn; the grass is not a bit trampled, either," he concluded as he stepped out again and saw the fresh untrodden greensward; he glanced irresolutely at the cave again. "'Twouldn't take me long to throw out those

bones," but again prudence whispered to him, and with a last regretful sigh he prepared to stay in the clearing.

"I'll call this 'Thicket Lodge,'" he told himself as he squeezed back to the side of the clearing near the entrance. "I wish I knew what Sharpwit is up to now. I wonder what part of the mountain the Little Princess is in, and where they keep the Jewel! I wish there was some way to send word to mother; she's just about taking tea now; if she could only see me and my nobby canteen!" and he took a drink from it, "Oh, I am glad I have it, and I know the poor warrior who owned it would be, too, if he knew! This time yesterday Owleyes was just beginning his journey to the Black Pool—" thus his thoughts flew, backward over what he knew, forward in surmises; but he did not forget he was in the enchanted forest, as he did that first night; for now he knew he was on the "Quest"; and when a slight sound came from the opposite side of the rock he straightened up from his half-reclining position, on the alert!

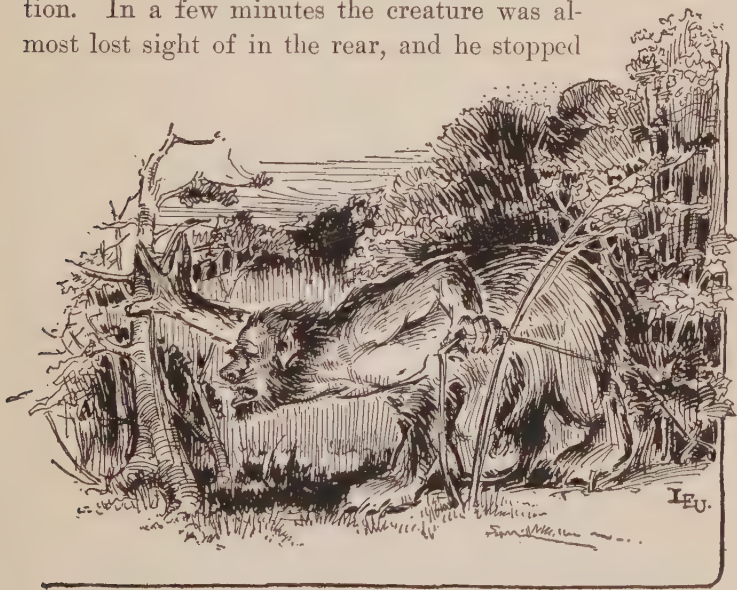
Again came the sound as of a soft footstep. Little Knight sprang lightly to his feet, and swiftly, noiselessly, glided toward the entrance; there he paused and looked back. At the same instant a shaggy head was thrust, as cautiously as his had been a while ago, around into this side of the clearing. Whatever the creature was, it had evidently thought to surprise its prey, for seeing Little Knight on his feet, and making a dash through the thicket—regardless now of what noise he made, for he thought only of flight—it gave vent to a blood-curdling sound, between the growl of a wild beast and the cry of an enraged human, that would strike terror to the stoutest heart, and rushed clumsily after him.

In that one glance Little Knight saw that the upper portion of the creature's face was like that of a man, the lower half that of a wild beast; but its expression was wholly animal, and ferocious to a degree. The upper part of its body was also like that of a man, though it was covered with thick, shaggy hair; from its waist down it resembled a grizzly bear.

He was pretty well scratched when he emerged from his romantic Thicket Lodge, where such a grim reality dwelt, the horrible reality which was now after him; he heard its clumsy, heavy crashing through the thicket, and after running for five minutes straight ahead, not trying to climb, he had made such little progress that he almost despaired of escaping the dreadful creature. He was nearly breathless when he turned and saw it coming steadily on, uttering its sickening cry. He thought desperately of his gun. He did not want to use it except as a last resort, for fear the sound would disclose his whereabouts to the Gnomes; he wished, too, to keep the little ammunition he had to protect himself against them if it should be necessary, but there seemed nothing else to do; he was drawing it forth to make ready when he thought of the frog skin. He had lost time unslinging the gun and fixing it on again, and the terrible thing was no more than ten paces away when he took out the shriveled-up bit of stuff and instinctively clapped it between his shoulders. In an instant he felt a cloud before his eyes as if something had been thrown over his head, then his vision cleared and he saw the half man, half beast, reach forth its arm to grab him. He started to run, and lo! he leaped like a great bullfrog high into the air and alighted ten yards beyond the ferocious creature's reach. The frog skin had fitted

itself to his body. For the time he had assumed the shape of a gigantic bullfrog, his steps becoming hops or leaps, as great in proportion to a real bullfrog's as his size was great in proportion to a real bullfrog's size.

What a delicious sense this leaping through the air gave him, especially as he was leaving old Hodge Podge of Thicket Lodge behind. He alighted as easily as after his ordinary boy's hop, skip, and jump, and with no more exertion. In a few minutes the creature was almost lost sight of in the rear, and he stopped



"At the same instant a shaggy head was thrust . . . into the clearing."

to rest. The only thing that worried him now was that it might pursue him all night; at least till dusk, and it lacked about two hours to nightfall, though the sun had set. When he next started he went toward the summit, for it had suddenly struck him he might as well be making

the most of his leaps. Some distance on he came to a ravine that seemed to rend the hill diagonally, its whole length. It must have been hundreds of feet deep, for the flowing of far-off water could be just heard as he stopped at its edge. The tireless Master of the Lodge had turned when he turned and was still after him, apparently as fresh as when he had started.

Little Knight took a short step, which was a mere hop, backward, then with one mighty bound leaped into the air, and landed on the other side of the treacherous chasm with six feet to the good. There he paused to watch old Hodge Podge's approach. He seemed to be more and more enraged. His growls were now like distant thunder, again like some human beside himself with anger. Little Knight knew he could not leap the chasm and wondered what he would do; nearer and nearer he came—he was not two yards away—now he was on the very brink. Blinded by rage, he did not notice the pit yawning at his feet. The fatal step was taken, and with a horrible cry that froze the blood in Little Knight's veins, he pitched headlong into the abyss. It was almost a minute before a faint, dull thud told that the ferocious thing had struck bottom, and he knew it would bother him no more; but he had no regrets as in the case of the old Giant; this wild creature, neither beast nor human, seemed out of place upon the earth; and it was with a sense of joy and lightness that he turned again toward the summit. He was surprised to find how near he was to it; a couple of flying leaps put him upon the uttermost top of Craggy Heights. He looked down the way he had come. How formidable it seemed! Without his good little frog skin, he doubted if he would ever have made it, for he could

trace the whole length of the chasm from where he stood, and it reached from end to end of the hill, cutting it diagonally across the top. He would have been compelled to climb down to the very bottom, and up again on the other side, and from what he could see it looked as though the trip would have been a mighty perilous one to undertake, even had he all the time he wanted. He felt very grateful to the frogs when he looked down on the far side, and realized that when he should have reached the base, the roughest part of his journey, so far as the road was concerned, would be over.

He took a good survey of the surrounding country. It seemed arid and bare near the foot of the hill; then he caught the line of forest trees again, but he looked farther on, over the treetops; his interest centered in the mountains, which, far off, like a blue thread of haze, met his sight. They were there, at any rate! Somehow that first glimpse of his goal encouraged him—he felt nearer the Little Princess, his father, the Magic Jewel!

As his progress was so easy, he concluded to try to make the base of the Heights before dark; caves had not so much attraction for him since his advent in Thicket Lodge! He stood irresolute a moment, hesitating to jump; someway standing on the top looking down, it made him dizzy to think of leaping off into space; it had been different coming up. He wasn't sure but that he might go tumbling head over heels. "But here goes," thought he, and murmuring:

"One for the money,
Two for the show,
Three to make ready,
And four to go,"

the old rhyme seemed to bring back his boyish confidence, or rashness, and off he leaped, down, down, finding the descent was just as easy as the coming up had been. He got bolder and bolder as leap succeeded leap and was down as near the base as he wished to go before dark. He took off the skin, which immediately shriveled up, and put it carefully back in his bosom.

Hunting among the rocks, he came across a little spring overhung by thick wreathing vines, and around which the vegetation was green and flourishing. Little Knight called it the Oasis of Rocky Range and prepared to enjoy an undisturbed rest. He had made a greater advance during the day than the Gnomes, ignorant of his mode of travel, would deem possible, and on that account felt safe from their snares.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MAGIC POINTERS

DAYLIGHT was just struggling through the bushes when he awoke. For a few moments he lay with a delicious sense of rest, listening to the murmur of the waters, but very soon memory came back and fully aroused him.

"I'm here yet, anyway," he thought, thankfully. After his devotions he made a refreshing toilet by dipping up water from the spring with his canteen, and left the pretty bower, eating his breakfast of Gnomes' bread and honeypods on the way.

The nearer he got to the base of the hill the rockier and barer it became, and he was dismayed when he reached a point close enough to observe it rightly, to see that for a great distance, as far as the eye could reach, the whole country was blackened and desolated as though it had been swept by fire. Should the Gnomes or any of the wicked inhabitants of the forest discover him after he should leave the shelter of the rocks, he would be at their mercy. He looked anxiously along the base of the hill, but only black desolation met him in either direction. Yet, should he decide to skirt the hill, he had no assurance that things were different at any point this side of Craggy Heights. He might, in the end, be compelled to cross over this awful

desert of ashes and cinders, and much precious time would be lost.

The Gnomes' ignorance of his presence in this vicinity was his best safeguard and every minute made that less sure; for finding he had passed White Owl Castle so much sooner than they had anticipated, and perhaps discovering the fate of old Hodge Podge, their suspicions would be awakened and they would be on the alert in every part of the forest.

And so, loading his gun, and seeing that his dagger and canteen were secure, Little Knight stepped boldly forth from his rocky shelter and with a brisk, steady little jog-trot, which he knew to be the quickest and least fatiguing way to travel afoot, started off on what he felt to be a very risky part of his journey.

He was surprised at the heat which remained in the blackened ground; the fire must have been a recent one. In a short time his feet began to feel very uncomfortable, and when the sun came out, even its soft Spring warmth was almost intolerable. He pushed his hat back; the perspiration stood in beads on his brow. A couple of times he stopped and took a sip from his canteen, but he felt he must be very sparing of his water supply; the trees were a mere black line in the distance, and he knew he could not keep up the pace at which he set out. He kept a sharp lookout for danger on all sides, turning occasionally to view the road over which he came, for he did not want to be taken unawares—his capture should not be accomplished without some damage to the enemy!

It was a good thing he had made a start before the sun was well up, he was thinking, as he stopped to take another sip of the precious water, when he thought he heard a

moan, as of some one, or something, in pain. With the top half screwed off his canteen he paused, listening. The moan reached him again; was it a decoy, a trick of the Gnomes? But the pain sounded so real that he had not the heart to disregard it, though he tiptoed very cautiously to the point from where it seemed to issue, a great, blackened tree stump. Peeping over it he saw a rabbit of unusually large size lying on the ground panting; just as he caught sight of him, he moaned again, and his agony was so real that Little Knight no longer resisted the promptings of his heart—in a trice he was kneeling by the little creature's side, and pouring a few drops of the precious water into his palm, he bathed his head, murmured pityingly:

“Poor little thing!” The rabbit slowly opened his eyes and looked so gratefully yet beseechingly at him that Little Knight poured some water on his tongue also. This seemed to brighten him considerably, but he still looked beseechingly up, and Little Knight made a cup of his hand from which the little creature drank as though famished—and looked for more! The sight of the water made Little Knight's own throat feel dry, his mouth parched; but he poured out handful after handful for the little animal until, he judged, but one good swallow remained; he had the canteen halfway to his lips when a glance at the eager eyes of the rabbit decided him. He poured it out as before.

“Poor little beastie,” he muttered compassionately, “one swallow will only tantalize me anyway, and maybe it will be the drop needful to help you reach your home again; so take it, old fellow!” he patted him on the head and the rabbit drank!

When the very last drop was gone, suddenly, from the half dead condition in which he appeared to be, he straightened out, his ears stood up on his head, and he looked as fresh and alert as if he had just emerged from the green depths where he usually roamed.

"Now I am glad I gave you that last drink," cried Little Knight, delighted; "it was just what you wanted; run along old fellow, while you are feeling fresh and good, for we won't be able to get any more water till we reach the forest shades again."

"Not without you, Little Knight," said the rabbit resolutely. Little Knight was so surprised he could only stare. "I would have died right here only you took pity on me, and revived me with the very last drop out of your canteen! The rabbits never forget anyone who has been to them a friend in need; you have been one to me indeed, and now I'll be one to you. Get on my back!"

"And spoil my good work!" said Little Knight, laughing, "that would be friendship, wouldn't it?"

"Don't be afraid of hurting me, get on my back; we have not a moment to lose for the fire has been kindled again—look!" Little Knight started, and looked back; sure enough, all along the base of Craggy Heights was a vivid red line as if a fierce fire was about to burst from under it, out over the already desolated ground. "If you won't come with me I'll stay with you! Do get on my back Little Knight." So imploring was the tone, that Little Knight obeyed without further parley, but instead of the rabbit's bending down to the ground under his weight he suddenly became as though made of steel, and to have wings to his feet in the bargain; so lightly, so buoyantly did he fly over the ground, Little Knight might have

been a feather on his back! On, on he sped, with long, flying leaps, over the fire-parched desert; and Little Knight rode as easily as if he were in a rocking-chair; as they flew on the air cooled his fevered temples; and he was surprised to find that even his thirst, which had intensified almost to agony, was relieved; had his canteen been brimming with cool sparkling water, he would not have cared to drink of it. Bright tongues of flame were shooting high into the air, in an angry red glare the whole length of the Heights. On what were they feeding? Every vestige of verdure had been burned to a cinder. On, on swept the fire, but the rabbit kept the same distance ahead and finally the trees began to take shape, the ground remained green in spots, the grass was merely scorched. Soon the shadows of the sturdy forest monarchs reached out and took them into their grateful embrace. The rabbit slowed down to a jog-trot.

"That was a race worth running," he said, looking back over his shoulder at the oncoming flames.

"And how splendidly you ran it!" cried Little Knight enthusiastically. "But had I not better walk now?"

"Oh, I'm not tired, I was simply famished with thirst, and overcome by the heat when you found me in the cinder patch back there; but your elixir put new life into me! I want to jog down Maple Lane a piece. I cannot help you any more, but I have a friend who may be able to give you some advice; she is just as sharp as she looks; you'll understand what I mean better when you see her," and the rabbit laughed humorously.

"Do any more for me," cried Little Knight, "you have saved my life—I shall never forget it!"

"My dear Little Knight Brave, you saved your own



"Little Knight rode as easily as if he were in a rocking-chair."

life when you so generously gave away your last drop of water!" and the rabbit turned down a path beneath the trees. "I hope Madam Quill will be at home," he said, stopping at a beautiful wide-spreading maple near the heart of the grove; "if she is you will have the better part of the day to travel; but I am anxious to have you see her before you go on."

Little Knight sat down on the mossy ground, and waited curiously as his little friend, going over to the tree, carefully held down the grasses at its very root with one paw, while with the other he rapped as near to the ground as he could get on the tree trunk, saying at the same time:

"Two times three and then three more,
A friend is rapping at your door!
O hasten, answer him, I pray,
His time is short, he cannot stay!"

In a few moments a little sharp nose poked from the tangle of tall grasses, and two beady, bright black eyes peered out at them.

“Oh, it’s you, Fleetfoot?” The voice matched the nose, though the tone was pleasant. “I was so busy watching yesterday, that I’m all tuckered out to-day and was taking an extra nap.”

“I am sorry we disturbed you, but I have a friend here whom I thought perhaps you might be able to help, and as his time is precious I ventured to come without an appointment; this is Little Knight Brave——”

“Little Knight Brave! Bless me!” The sharp nose and beady eyes were all attention, and Madam advanced till she was well in the open and held out an eager paw to Little Knight, who recognized her as a member of the porcupine family.

“You seem to have known of him,” exclaimed Fleetfoot, who was much pleased by her reception of his new friend.

“Known of him! Why, the woods were ringing with his name yesterday—I was wishing I could warn him not to attempt to cross Craggy Heights! Oh, yes, I’ve known of him, but I never expected to have the good fortune to see him,” and her face assumed a grim expression, while all her quills stood out, till she looked twice her ordinary size. “How did you escape—the Gnomes are just wild!”

Little Knight related his adventures to his new friends, who listened with an absorbed interest. When he came to the point where he met Fleetfoot, the rabbit took up the thread and told how he had given him his last drop of water. Madam Quill was delighted.

“The Gnomes are just wild,” she exclaimed again,

“and Sharpwit will be on the lookout now everywhere. That monster of the hill whom you succeeded in sending to his death is one of their ‘pets’ as they call him! They had him caged in the mountain all winter, and for several weeks have given him scarcely anything to eat, so that he was even more ferocious than usual; only yesterday they set him loose in his camping ground, and it seems he made straight for his den, and found you there. They were busy working around here all yesterday morning. I heard Sharpwit tell Guzzlemug he would run no risks; he would set all his traps and if you should escape Tricksy’s they would be ready. They started the fire about noon. It burned everything in its path this side of the Heights, so you did well to come across at once——”

“But what does it feed on now that everything is burned,” asked Little Knight, puzzled.

“Magic,” answered Madam. “The fire sweeps back as soon as it reaches that belt of trees. It will come and go every few hours from now on, until the Gnomes remove the spell, or until you get the Magic Jewel of the Forest in your possession. It is Sharpwit’s latest invention, and he is elated with it. I wish I could help you, but I can’t even tell you where the Jewel is, though I fancy they keep it in the mountain; I’ve tried my best but have never been able to get the slightest clew. However, I can give you a couple of pointers which will aid you some; keep one in your hand—you see they are united by a thread—the other will roll on ahead of you until it comes to a danger point, when the thread will immediately roll up on the one you hold. Then by no means take another step in any direction the pointer refuses to roll, without first pausing; you will surely discover something that has stopped it, and

will be forewarned, at any rate." Saying this, Madam, who had taken two small quills from her breast, handed them to Little Knight, who received them gratefully. He showed her the Gnomes' trinket, but she could make nothing of it.

"Your conclusion to keep it till in peril, and then to throw it into the water is a wise one, I believe. But on no account let go of the chain, so that if nothing comes of your trial that way you will still have it to experiment with; otherwise it would probably be lost to you."

"I am glad you reminded me of that, for I might have let it go, in my excitement," said Little Knight, and once more with good wishes ringing in his ears, he fared forth, alone.

CHAPTER XV

THE GNOMES' TRINKET

HE threw the quill around which the thread was wound, downward, much as though he were spinning a top; it flew to the ground and commenced to roll over and over ahead of him. It was so agile and tireless that it amused him and kept him company; he found it kept pace with him—that is, if he walked fast, it rolled quickly along, but when he slackened his steps the quill rolled slowly, always keeping a convenient distance ahead of him; but he soon became accustomed to seeing it. The traveling was good, the forest seeming to try to make up for the roughness of Craggy Heights, so soft and smooth was the turf, while the underbrush grew only in sparse patches which were easily circled, and one lovely grove was succeeded by another, linked by enchanting dells and glades.

It was coming on to dusk when Little Knight thought he must be approaching a stream, the air was so fresh and moist; he quickened his steps, for besides his longing to get to it—and if possible, in it—he would have either to cross over or find some place of refuge on this side for the night.

How beautiful was that first glimpse of its sparkling crystal through the trees! It was about a hundred feet wide—he might swim it, he speculated, when, slap! he felt

something come suddenly against the fingers from between which the thread was hanging. Involuntarily he started, then saw the pointer had left the ground and clung tightly to his hand.

Danger!

Back he darted behind the nearest tree. He waited quite a while then threw his trusty little friend in every direction, but quickly it returned with its noiseless slap except when thrown toward the road over which he had just traveled; but he would not turn back.

Softly he arose and peered around him; at last he discovered, scarcely to be distinguished from its surroundings, a green-thatched cottage with one small window in the gable and another beside an open doorway, in the lower story, off to the right just outside the grove in which he stood. As he caught sight of it, the last rays of the setting sun struck the windows, tingeing them with a rosy glow which gave to the place such a cozy, homey look he felt an almost irresistible desire to enter. As he glanced at the open door forth stepped—could he believe his eyes!—the Little Princess—none other than the dear little, long-lost, long-sought Little Princess!

Little Knight pinched himself and rubbed his eyes to make sure he was not dreaming, but there she stood, the Little Royal Lady of the Court, at the rustic gate, gazing this way and that in the gathering dusk as if vainly trying to pierce beyond these forest fastnesses. Little Knight forgot his little guide's warning!

Eagerly he left his shelter, eagerly went toward the little girl who was apparently so amazed at seeing him that she could not speak.

He was within a few yards of her when prudence re-

turned, but not for himself, for her—if he were caught by the Gnomes, she would be left in their power. He must ascertain if any of them were about.

“Little Princess, Little Princess, don’t you remember me, the boy to whom you gave your birthday rose?” he asked eagerly in a low voice.

“Little Knight!” said she, in a whisper also. “Come closer; Sharpwit is away now but he will return. You must come into the cottage. Letty is getting supper.” He detected the aroma of coffee, of ham and eggs—the most delicious smell he thought ever sniffed into hungry nostrils; except for the Gnomes’ bread, he had been living on rather “woodsey” fare for a growing boy, for several days. “We can hide you in the cottage, and plan our escape to-night.”

“Are you sure none of the Gnomes is around? Suppose you go and see, they may have come in by the back door.”

“Oh, I am positive they did not, they always come this direction. Come with me now. Perhaps while you are waiting Sharpwit will return; then you will have no chance to get in, and we cannot make any plans!” She clasped her hands pleadingly. Little Knight could not refuse.

“Lead on, then, Little Princess. I had no idea I would find you in this part of the forest!” Then suddenly he remembered his little monitor—it had warned him! When the little girl’s back was turned he attempted to throw it down, but it adhered to his fingers as closely as the skin which grew on them. Vainly did he try to pull it away with his other hand—it would not budge!

Danger, to follow the Little Princess! Rapidly his

mind worked; it would be better to disappoint her now, and be able to help her later than to rush into an ambush of his enemies; once in their toils all chance to rescue her would be lost. Spite of his longing to be with her, spite of the insistent call of the coffee, the ham and eggs, Madam Quill's little guide prevailed. With a long-drawn sigh he resisted the temptation. He had reached the gate, she was halfway up the path to the door, when he again called to her softly. After an almost imperceptible hesitation she turned.

"I will not go in," he commenced, intending to console her with promises of the morrow, but the instant the words were spoken a most astounding thing happened. The form he had taken for the Little Princess was transformed into one of the ugliest, hatchet-faced little Gnomes imaginable; his small, cunning eyes were ablaze with anger as, rushing toward Little Knight, he cried:

"You won't, won't you! We'll see about that, or my name's not Sharpwit!" but before he could get outside the gate there was a loud report and another of Sharpwit's traps, the green-thatched cottage, went up in a cloud of white smoke, taking its wicked inventor with it.

Without hesitating a moment Little Knight flew toward the stream which was not more than fifty yards away, taking the Gnomes' trinket from his bosom as he ran. When he reached the water's edge, he thrust it into the sparkling ripples, keeping a firm hold on the chain, which ran through his fingers as though it were slipping from his grasp! There was a soft, rustling motion—and—a pair of swans as black and glossy as polished ebony rose to the surface!

Little Knight had only time to note that they were

bound together by the steel chain which was now about a dozen times its original length, before he vaulted on the back of the one nearest him and they started out with long, graceful strokes toward the opposite bank.

Trusting himself to their guidance, he turned and watched the shore they had left. After the sun had set, Night lost no time in throwing her shadows over the forest, and the fringe of trees looked dark and forbidding from the breast of the stream; but his wonderings as to whether Sharpwit were disposed of for good, or not, were soon answered. Lights twinkled here and there in the woodland, making for the shore; he heard shouts back and forth; then the same hatchet-faced one who had been enveloped in the smoke of the cottage, stepped from the shadows to the river's brink—leveled his gun——

They were about midstream and made a good target; what if his good little carriers should be hit? He had no time to think what he should do in that case.

“Hold tight,” a voice said; instinctively he obeyed. Two long, glossy necks, each encircled by the steel chain, dipped into the stream; there was a muffled report, a bullet skimmed over the water above them, sizzled, as it struck the surface a few feet beyond. He expected to rise, but down, down, down he went! It seemed to him they would never reach bottom—(yet it could not have been more than half a minute for he held his breath the whole time)—when there was a flutter of wings, a strike, a splash, a rapid swish of water past them, and they were on the surface again.

But where were the Gnomes' lights? It was pitch dark. Where were their shouts? All was intensely quiet. Was he even now in their power? Had using their trin-

ket been a fatal act? Had he voluntarily given himself into their hands? All these unanswerable questions flashed through his mind, till suddenly he felt something soft and downy against him. It was the other swan which had floated to his side.

“Do not be alarmed, Little Knight,” she said, and her voice was sweet as music, not harsh, as is an ordinary swan’s voice (except when, just before they die, they are said to sing their death song in transcendently beautiful tones)—“you are safe from the wicked Gnomes for the time. We have come to the surface of an underground stream of which they have no knowledge. It flows into the one we started on, at the side, down near the bottom, and has a subterranean course for so many miles before it rises to the surface that they never dream of connecting the two streams in their thoughts. When we start in the morning we will be far away from the point where they will be looking for you, though doubtless Sharpwit has traps and snares laid wherever you may go. Do not be worried about our carrying you; we feel your weight no more than we would an extra drop of water; and when we reach a good camping place for the night, we will tell you our history.”

Little Knight had bethought him of his pointer, and had tried throwing it; instantly a soft splash told him it had fallen upon the water, and it went bob-bobbing along with a soft repetition of the sound until he wound in the thread, so he knew the black swan was telling the truth.

How delighted he was!

“What should I have done if I had not found you!” he exclaimed.

“We have been rejoiced ever since you picked us up;

it is a chance for us we never hoped to have; you will understand when we tell you our story," said the one he was riding.

"And then to think you were so bright as to put us into the water! It's a wonder you didn't hear us shout when you told Madam Quill your intention this morning," exclaimed her sister. "But here is a splendid place to pass the night."

"Lie flat and hold on!" They seemed to enter a narrower, lower passageway. Little Knight felt himself being borne up, up, up, swiftly, till at last——

"All safe," said a silvery voice, and straightening his back he felt the cool air of heaven blowing on his face; he was surrounded once more by the forest trees, the star-gemmed sky bowed above him. He took a long breath. Though it had seemed night in the forest before they had dived into the subterranean stream, the utter darkness they had just left made the gloom around them now seem bright; he could see much better, he thought, than if he had stayed above ground the whole time.

The swans swam to the side of the stream where a cluster of giant water willows leaned over; in some places their roots shone white and bare of ground, where they reached from the bank into the water.

"Hold again!"

Down they dived but came up in a moment on the other side of the willowroot curtain, which concealed one of the coziest little forest retreats any hunter could imagine. It was softly carpeted with moss, which, notwithstanding its nearness to the water, was perfectly dry.

"Here we are, Little Knight," said the black swans, and with a sigh of content he entered the haven.

"My, but I am tired!" said he. "I didn't know how tired till I knew I could rest!"

"That's because you are brave; you never give up, even to yourself, until all need for courage is over. But you must be hungry, too; what would you like for supper?"

"Ham and eggs and coffee," exclaimed he without an instant's hesitation, though he laughed as he said it.

"That of Sharpwit's must have smelled good to you!" and the swans joined in his merriment.

"Sharpwit deserves his name! Only, if he had waited a moment longer, I would have told him I would try to get in to-morrow and he could have taken me in the woods, while I was waiting a chance to help the Little Princess; how foolish I was!"

"You were not foolish; anyone would have been deluded; and had you not been prudent and obeyed the magic danger-pointers you would be in the Gnomes' net by this, and all our hopes, all hopes of ever gaining the Magic Jewel of the Forest, would be ended!"

"And it is a pleasure to grant gifts to one who appreciates them as you do, Little Knight. Many another would have disregarded the quills' warning when they thought they saw the Little Princess."

"I did at first," said Little Knight ruefully.

"Only at first when you forgot them in your surprise. But it would have done Sharpwit no good even if he had heard what you intended to say. That is the one great flaw in those magic charms. There is always one thing which, if said or done, immediately dispels them, no matter how well they would play into their worker's hands were they to hold out just a little while longer; now Sharpwit's power in that particular charm ended

when you stopped outside the gate and refused to enter; had you taken one step inside, you would have been on specially charmed ground and he would have had you in his clutches; his cottage would have stood just as long as he pleased. Your refusal to enter spoiled that for him. All their charms could be broken, if we only knew the certain words to utter or the act to perform. Now in regard to the forest, just as soon as anyone from the Kingdom who has never been under the Gnomes' spell shall take the Magic Jewel in his hand, their power over it will be ended, never to be regained."

"Then," inquired Little Knight earnestly, "if I should get possession of the Jewel, even if only for a moment—you know they might kill me before I should be able to get away with it—so far as the forest, so far as the people of the Kingdom are concerned—it would be as good as if I were to place it in the King's hands?"

"Just as good, looking at it that way, though I am sure none of them would enjoy it the same as if you were left to enjoy it with them."

"And we feel you will be!" added the other. "The Jewel will be worthless to this tribe of Gnomes the instant it leaves their possession. You have succeeded so far on the Quest I think their ownership is about ended, and that the dear old forest will soon be free!"

There was such confidence in her tones that Little Knight felt greatly encouraged.

"Well, there is one charm of theirs I can dispel without the Jewel," said he, "the one that binds you. You need never again be anything but what you are. I shall break this chain and free you, but you must try to get into the Bird and Squirrel territory of the forest before

you are discovered, or stay in hiding here until I release you—if I ever do get the Jewel,” and he told them the penalty the Gnomes had imposed on the squirrels and the members of the feathered tribe for the trick Robin the Bold had once played upon them.

“We know only too well how malicious they are,” said they sadly, “we do not need to fear that, however; here is your supper and while you enjoy your ham and eggs we will explain everything to you.”

And wasn't Little Knight astonished! For behold! at their words a small but perfectly appointed table had sprung up, seemingly from the ground, in front of him; there were flowers and candles with fragrance and light; there was a dainty napkin ring of exquisitely wrought gold, with festoons of small roses patterned around it; and best of all for a hungry boy to see, there was a platter of the most delicious-looking pink ham, with brown frizzled edges, and eggs with golden centers floating in a sea of snowy white; there was bread, flaky, with a golden-brown crust; a mold of jelly that looked like a quivering red rose; a dish of butter that looked like a firm yellow one—and fruit—peaches, actually the most beautiful, velvety, bloomy peaches that ever grew in a sun-kissed old orchard—peaches, in May! Oh, it would take too long to tell about everything there was, only there was coffee, in a quaint little urn which was a mass of little roses, fashioned from pink pearls with small diamond dewdrops, with cream it did Little Knight good just to see, as it actually rolled slowly out of the quaintest little pitcher that just matched the urn and sugar bowl. And how good that coffee did smell! And the taste—but what's the use trying to describe it!

Little Knight was so filled with astonishment that at first he said he couldn't eat a bite, but he found out how very much mistaken he was, as soon as they got him started.

And while he ate, this is the tale the swans told:

CHAPTER XVI

THE TALE THE BLACK SWANS TOLD

YOU must know, Little Knight, that we are not really swans, but fairies. Long before the wicked Gnomes stole the Magic Jewel of the Forest, we roamed here as we willed, always, of course, invisible to mortal eyes unless we desired them to look upon us. The entrance to our realm is miles from here, nearer the mountains. When the Gnomes came here, they made it very disagreeable to us, for we are visible to them, and from pure wickedness annoyed us in many ways. Our Queen finally had to enter into an agreement with their King whereby full power was given her over a certain portion of the forest—a small part, you may be sure, and at his peril no Gnome could step within the Fairy Ring, nor could any fairy step without it, unless at great risk of coming under the Gnome King's rule! However, we found it was much pleasanter to have our small ring, unmolested, than to have the whole forest wherein to roam, with no assurance of peace no matter where we might go; and so we sealed up all the entrances except those in the Fairy Ring. But it was hard, too, to confine ourselves to our territory after the freedom we had enjoyed for ages, and so you may be sure whose side we were on when we found the Gnomes had stolen the Magic Jewel of the Forest! Our Queen called a meeting, and we all pledged ourselves to

do everything in our power to aid the mortals in regaining it. She herself was most earnest in her efforts to learn all she could concerning it, and, alas! we were on the Quest ourselves when we were taken. It was a lovely day, and a number of us had been up in the Ring promenading. We are our Queen's first ladies in waiting, and had lingered with her, when the others returned to the Realm. As soon as we were alone she informed us that two Gnomes were asleep in the elder bushes just outside our Ring. She fancied they might talk when they awoke, and wished to hide to listen if anything would be said about the Magic Jewel. Of course we were eager for the adventure, and were soon hidden in the elders; we had scarcely settled ourselves when the Gnomes awoke—and sure enough they did begin to talk of the Magic Jewel! We would take most any risk to find out where they kept it, and so, when they arose and left the clump of elders, at a questioning glance from our Queen, we nodded and followed her lightly through the grasses. They would never have known we were near had they been as they pretended; but just as we got beyond the reach of our own territory, they turned upon us; one pulled off his hood, and we found ourselves face to face with the King! Learning how zealous was our Queen in aiding the people of the Kingdom, he had cunningly schemed our capture! Outside our Ring our Queen was powerless against him. But she pleaded—how she pleaded, not for herself, for us—he only laughed at her, and seeing she was humbling herself for worse than nothing, we begged her to desist, telling her we would rather be in exile with her than in our own dear land, not knowing where she might be. We did not know, alas, that we were to be parted! But to go back to that day, we were near a

stream, and immediately the wicked Gnome King turned us into the forms we now wear, then brought forth this chain with its cramped cells, and imprisoned us within them, crying, 'You shall be my slaves to carry as swans, until a mortal shall set you free!' You, dear Little Knight, are that mortal! This is the very stream we first entered upon under this form; we shall float as near to the Fairy Ring upon it as possible, and hope to be back in our own dear Fairyland to-morrow—but shall we find our dear Queen there? Alas, alas, we have been unable to learn to what fate she was doomed! Only we know he cannot enslave her; one monarch may not enslave another in our lands; but he has quite enough power over her! He could restrict, transform, everything except enslave. That is one comfort, she has not been forced to aid him in his wicked schemes. As close as we have been to them, they have never dropped a hint of the whereabouts of either our Queen or the Magic Jewel in our presence; they are so secret; only that one thing did we learn, that once a mortal who has never been under their spell, holds the Jewel, if only for an instant, in his hand, their power over the forest is forever dispelled!"

Their story finished, all three discussed plans for the morrow. Little Knight wished to free them at once, but if he severed the chain while they were on land, they would immediately assume their rightful forms, which they did not wish to do, as they thought they could reach the Fairy Ring quicker by water; he was to break the chain just before he departed, and they would be transformed into fairies the first step they should take upon land thereafter; what a relief it would be to them!

They slept so soundly it did not seem any time to Little

Knight till he was awakened to find a substantial breakfast awaiting him.

"Put your napkin ring upon your finger," the fairy swans commanded when he had finished eating. Little Knight obeyed, and instantly it fitted itself to the finger on which he had slipped it, and became to all appearances a ring remarkable only for its exquisite carving, for the festoons of roses showed as clear-cut and finished in their diminished state as they had been when of much larger size; but the carving was not the most remarkable thing about it—the fairies told him all he had to do at any time was to wish for whatsoever he desired to eat, from a sandwich to an elaborate dinner, for one, or a thousand, or any number he thought of, then to press the ring, and his wishes would be fulfilled; but while the charm was perpetual, it only held good in the forest where the fairies resided.

"Oh, you dear little swans!" cried Little Knight. "Such a valuable present!"

"Valuable? Pshaw!—when you rescued us from the terrible thralldom we have endured for nearly five hundred years? For the hopes we may only look to realize through you? Rather, where is the gift valuable enough to repay you—neither fairy nor mortal knows! Your nearest recompense will be the love and gratitude of every good heart that knows or hears of you!" Little Knight's face was like a great blush rose when the enthusiastic little swan fairy finished singing his praises. Her sister nodded approval to every word, but seeing his embarrassment she said lightly:

"And be sure you show your appreciation of our gift, dear Little Knight! It will be a great comfort to us, if

we succeed in reaching Fairyland, to know there are wishes coming in from you ; as long as you are able to eat, you know, we will be sure you are pretty nearly all right ! ” Then they all laughed and made haste to depart. When they reached the bank Little Knight, with the aid of his dagger, soon severed the magic chain—magic now no longer—and it was decided that the very first order received from him after their arrival in Fairyland they would send it to him as a sign that they had reached their haven in safety.

And so, with the best of good wishes, they parted, Little Knight taking his way through the trees, the Black Swans floating majestically down the stream.



CHAPTER XVII

THE SEVEN BROTHERS

BOB, bob, bobbing along, merrily went his trusty little pointers all the morning. When the sun was at its highest Little Knight thought he would try his new talisman. Finding a well-sheltered nook where the gnarled roots of a big oak made him a seat and a growth of underbrush completely walled him in, he first threw his guard in all directions; it lay quietly in the grass, a sign that his enemies were nowhere near.

“Here goes, then,” thought he as he pressed the beautiful little ring, and lo! there was the tiniest table that just fit in the space before him, with dainty sandwiches, a pitcher of sparkling water, a dish of olives, and a plate of ice cream—raspberry, vanilla, and chocolate. Just as he had fancied, only it was served so temptingly; he had only thought of the things to eat. The ice cream was molded in the form of roses and was flanked by a basket of the most toothsome little cakes he had ever seen; the sandwiches were cut in fanciful shapes, and the pitcher was silver with a wreath of roses hammered around its fat sides with a goblet to match, which it did him good to drink out of, standing right under its nose; while three real roses, fresh and dewy, as if just plucked in some old-time garden, nodded at him from a slender crystal vase in the center, in the cheeriest, friendliest way!

The first thing he did was to look for the steel chain, but it was not there.

"They have scarcely had time to get home," he reflected. "Better luck next time. Here's to your safe arrival in the Realms of Fairyland, my dear little friends," and he drank a goblet of cool water. "The only danger in this gift is that a fellow will be tempted to keep on wishing and eat so much he can't waddle!" he laughed to himself, but did not yield to the temptation. Soon the tireless little quill was pointing the way again, when all at once such a jabbering and squeaking as there was! But the little pointers bobbed serenely along and Little Knight followed; once he did look back to be sure, but saw only the silent forest, which seemed to close in on the road behind him. What was the matter?

Following the sound he came to an immense tree, a lower limb of which had been partially broken from the trunk, and in some manner—how, Little Knight did not pause to wonder—an unfortunate monkey had caught his foot in the crack. While it had doubtless gone in easily enough, it was quite another matter to get it out, and the more the poor thing tugged and pulled the tighter its foot became fastened.

"Well, Chatterbox, you're in a bad fix, aren't you? It's a good thing I happened along or dear only knows whether or not you ever would get loose. Let me help you, my dear sir!" for the monkey looked so comic, and so absurdly human, that Little Knight could not help laughing, and addressed it as though it were a person. He jumped up and caught the limb which bent under his weight; the crack widened, the monkey was free—but not even waiting to say "Thank you," he gave a terrified look over Little

Knight's head, uttered a piercing shriek and fled from sight in the tree tops. Involuntarily Little Knight looked around, but was just too late to follow the monkey's example, for he let go his hold at the same moment and dropped right in the clutches of the ugliest little old woman he had ever read or heard tell of, or ever expected to see again. She was short and broad and thick. Her nose was like a great red knob, her mouth was large with enormous yellow, strong-looking teeth; her little bits of eyes were set close together in her very broad, coarse face. She wore a shallow sunbonnet of faded yellow, a faded red dress, and a faded gingham apron which divided her into an upper and a lower part.

"Aha, aha! So I've caught you, my fine lad! You'll not outwit old Mother Holdfast, if you did get ahead of her son for the time. He told me what a silly thing you were, stopping to cry over every beast you came across, instead of going on about your own mischievous business, and we set this trap for you; I've baited it with a fresh monkey every hour since dawn, thinking you might come this way, though we did not really expect you by this road; you thought we wouldn't, didn't you, you nasty little whippersnapper you! But Sharpwit's the boy! You won't get ahead of him often. I'll call Fine-ear and Nimble-shanks; they will be here by night. Nimbleshanks will carry you to the King, and once under the Gnomes' spell your hash will be settled! And to think you might have got past if you hadn't stopped to help a monkey who is as silly as yourself or he could gnaw himself free!" The dreadful old woman ceased talking with this taunt, and going to two great trees that faced the opening on the left from where Little Knight had entered it, stood between them,

and making a trumpet of her free hand called at the top of her voice:

"Hoo-ee, hoo-ee! Fine-ear will hear that," said she, "though he is miles and miles away, so you needn't try to escape; if Nimbleshanks couldn't catch you they would send the Seven Brothers after you. Oh, no, my fine lad, you won't get away this time! Old Mother Holdfast has got you!"

And indeed that seemed too true from the present outlook, Little Knight thought. "Holdfast" was no name for the way she held on to him, as she waddled through the thicket opposite the point from where she had hailed her trusty sons. Who were the Seven Brothers, and what were they like, he wondered, as on, on, the hideous old woman went.

When they came out into an opening in which stood a rude hut, Mother Holdfast was puffing like a locomotive, but her grasp on Little Knight's shoulder never slackened.

"Since dawn you have kept me busy putting in fresh monkeys as soon as one would quit squealing. Now I've got you I'll make you pay up for giving a respectable old Gnomess like me such trouble; chasing monkeys is no easy task, let me tell you!" Little Knight fancied how funny she must have looked scrambling after the lively little creatures, and, doleful as he felt, could hardly keep from smiling. "Now I can rest a bit," she said with a sigh of content, "but I'll make sure of you before I sit down." Under a big tree at one side was a chair, short and broad-seated; taking up a coil of rope which lay on it she bade him sit down, digging her fingers into his shoulder as she did so, with such malicious force that the tears sprang to his eyes, though he kept from crying out by grit-

ting his teeth together. Unlike old Owleyes the Wise, who had left his arms free because he was so sure of his victim, old Mother Holdfast ran no such risks. She tied him securely, first winding the rope round and round his arms, knotting it over and over; then around his legs and ankles in the same manner; this done, she bound him to the chair and the chair to the tree. When she was through she heaved a sigh of satisfaction.

"Aha, you'll find you'll not outwit Mother Holdfast, my finely trussed bird! Sharpwit will have to own I've



““You'll find you'll not outwit Mother Holdfast.””

bettered him this time!" As she was talking she seated herself in a companion chair to his, except that hers had arms to it; and tilting back against the end wall of the hut, facing him, she reached down and brought out a short black bottle from behind a rock at her side, and placing it to her lips the gurg-gurgle of the contents could be plainly heard. Little Knight wished it would put her to sleep though the way he was bound he hardly knew what difference it could make to him, except for the feeling of satisfaction it would give him. After sampling the black bottle several more times the old woman's head did begin to nod. Having called her worthy sons and feeling sure her captive was secure, she gave herself up to what she considered a well-earned rest. She was soon fast asleep! "Thud!" Little Knight started, inside, he could not move otherwise; old Mother Holdfast stirred uneasily but did not waken.

He looked curiously around through the grass, for the noise seemed to come from the ground, to see what had caused it. Ah, there it was, only a cocoanut which had fallen from a bough above him!

"If it had fallen on mine," thought he with a glimmer of mirth, "I'm afraid Mother Holdfast would have been wakened from her doze, I would have yelled so loud; and Fine-ear would be sure to hear me, and Sharpwit would jump on Nimblehanks's back and be here in a jiffy"—his eyes had been idly resting on the cocoanut and all at once it seemed to him it had moved! "But—I haven't been sampling the black bottle! I wonder if the stuff is so strong it affects anyone near the person who drinks it?" Then actually, unless the fumes from the black bottle had affected him, the cocoanut rolled clear over, toward him, in the grass! This it kept on doing until it was within a

yard of him, when a strange thing happened—the shell fell open in halves, and a monkey, the tiniest, cutest little creature he had ever seen, jumped out of it and ran nimbly up his leg until it reached his knee; there it paused, finger to lip, but for the moment Little Knight was so astonished he would have been safe not to speak even without the warning. His eyes were open to their widest, as was also his mouth. How he longed to put forth his hand to caress the cunning little creature! How he would love to keep it for a pet! But the little monkey paused scarcely a second; with another nimble run it was on his shoulder, was whispering in his ear:

“Keep quiet, Little Knight, I am the monkey you released from old Mother Holdfast’s trap. I did not see the old hag in time to warn you, but I will gnaw the ropes now and you may yet escape before those wretches get here.” Before Little Knight could thank him he vanished behind the chair.

In an incredibly short time his sharp little teeth, working with good will, freed Little Knight’s arms; it did not take him a moment to unsheath his dagger and cut the rest of the bonds. The little monkey, that had grown suddenly to his right size, showed by his capers how delighted he was.

They both stood a moment looking longingly at the ugly old hag, fast asleep in the tilted chair. Then Little Knight turned regretfully to his companion. “We wouldn’t dare,” he whispered, for he knew Chatterbox was wishing the same thing he was. “We could not pull the rope tight enough without waking her, and her screams would warn Fine-ear that something was up; and if we tried to gag her before tying her she would grab us

and hold on to us like a vise; you know she could hold us both all day without the least trouble."

"You are right; better let well enough alone," nodded the monkey. Both turned toward the opening into the woods, where with a silent handshake they separated. Little Knight ran as fast as he could without making too much noise, away from the hut, until he was nearly breathless. Then once again giving his little magic danger points the right of way, he made as great speed as possible toward the mountains.

It was almost dusk when he heard fearful howls behind him, and turning, saw, halfway across the clearing he had just traversed, a number of dark objects coming full tilt after him. He lost no time but made for the nearest tree and was soon high in its branches. As they came nearer he saw they were a pack of hungry-looking wolves, and knew that they were making straight for his refuge. On they came, unerringly, instinctively, toward him, and soon gathered, howling and jumping wildly upward, at the foot of the tree—their eyes blazing in the semi-darkness, their red fangs and wide, sharp-toothed jaws showing cruel and fierce! They kept moving about so that Little Knight at first could not make out just how many there were, but finally he managed to count them—seven! And all at once the truth dawned upon him. They were the Seven Brothers old Mother Holdfast had threatened him with! He must act instantly for their presence meant the other wicked brothers, Sharp-wit, Fine-ear, and Nimblehanks knew of his escape and were even now after him, following the wolves' trail!

The time had come for using his gun! Caution would avail him nothing now. With great care he unslung it,

looked to see that it was properly loaded—crash! The wolves had concerted a sudden dash at the tree and Little Knight, aiming his weapon at one of the wide-mouthed foe, was dislodged from his perch—crash! Making frantic efforts to grasp the limbs as he went, he fell head over heels right down among the hungry brutes! Fortunately he landed square on the back of one of them, crushing it, stunned for the moment, to the ground, while his gun, striking on the trigger already set, went off with a loud “bang!” hitting another in the side and sending it, howling with pain, rolling over and out of action for the time being, if not for good.

Surprised by the sudden onslaught, and frightened by the flash of the gun, the rest of the cowardly pack slunk quickly away, their tails between their legs, and Little Knight, not waiting to see what havoc he had wrought, and in his excitement not feeling any bruises, was on his feet and back in the tree again like a rubber ball—but not an instant too soon, for recovering from their fright, the rest of the Seven Brothers were howling and snapping and jumping after him again, just as he got out of their reach. He climbed clear to the slender top of the tree, and looked eagerly and anxiously across the clearing. Dimly he perceived three forms just emerging from the shadows on the other side; his fate seemed sealed; he looked in the other direction, seeking, even at the last moment, some means of escape.

The slender tree top swayed under his slightest movement—and suddenly his eyes brightened—an idea had come to him! It was rather desperate, but he was in a desperate situation—he would try it at all events!

Gently he commenced to bend the tree top backward

and forward, backward and forward, toward the tree next to it; each time it more nearly bridged the space between the yawning abyss wherein to fall meant being torn to pieces by the wolves, or capture, and perhaps a worse death at the hands of the Gnomes! But with scarcely a quickening of the pulses now that he had some plan to try, some hope to encourage him, back and forth he swung in the pliant tree top, back and forth, till finally its green leaves touched those of its sister—and at the next bending down Little Knight let go his hold on the one, and grasped desperately, but with accurate calculation at the other—there was a swish of brushing leaves as the released top swung back, and the wolves were dancing madly around an empty tree!

Rejoiced at his success, Little Knight looked to the next tree top; if anything it was nearer to the one he was now in than the first had been. He repeated his tactics, with equal success—but what if the wolves should follow! They had not yet, so on to the next neighbor! As he looked off through the forest, in the direction in which he was swinging from tree to tree, he saw, far away, a strange light. It was of a pale-rose color, and as he paused for breath he watched it anxiously; it might be another of Sharpwit's traps! Sharpwit on his trail in the rear—one of his traps ahead! But what was that! Clear in the rosy glow he saw two graceful swans, black as ebony, held together by a glittering chain! Even as he gazed they changed to two exquisitely beautiful fairies, with gauzy wings, beckoning to him, and the chain became a garland of roses.

Joy! Joy! They were his little Fairy friends, and that was the Fairy Ring!—And the space between was

covered by a line of trees such as he was in! With a right good will he set to work swinging again back and forth through space, and just as the three wicked Gnome brothers joined the seven cruel Wolf brothers, Little Knight, exhausted but happy, dropped down among his little friends, safe in the Fairy Ring!

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MAIDS OF DEW

AND what a welcome he received! They knew something must be wrong when supper time came and no order. Immediately they had determined to light up the Ring, and Stardawn and Dewbright had been changing into swans and back again, for in their own realm they had power to do such things, for a couple of hours, hoping if he were in trouble he might see them, and if possible come to them for refuge. When one of their "lookouts" had discovered him and his novel mode of traveling, the whole Ring had become wild with excitement. And they were buzzing around him now so that he could scarcely hear his ears! The little swan fairies told him what had transpired since they had parted on the banks of the stream.

"We reached home about three o'clock, without any adventures whatsoever. The Gnomes are too busy trying to keep track of you to miss us, and Squatty and Cheerful will not mention losing us, you may be sure. Very likely it will never be known who did take us out last, and our disappearance will be forever a mystery in the Kingdom of the Gnomes. But our dear Queen is in their power yet; if we could only find her we would be perfectly happy!"

"You must remember that she will be free if I suc-



"All the fairies smiled through their tears and clapped their hands."

ceed in gaining the Magic Jewel," said Little Knight cheerfully.

"Yes, oh, yes! And we are sure you will succeed," and all the fairies smiled through their tears and clapped their hands. "What a time there will be in Fairyland then! You will have to come often to see us, Little Knight."

"We will always be visible to you no matter where we are, and visible also to whomsoever you may wish to see us."

"But Little Knight must be worn out after all he has gone through since noon," said a kind-looking little fairy. "And he has had nothing to eat since luncheon."

"True, how could we forget! But we were so excited over having him safe here with us! Lead on, Prince Joli."

Between Stardawn and Dewbright—the swan fairies—and surrounded by troops of the affectionate little beings, Little Knight made a triumphant march to the center of the Ring. Here Prince Joli, who was dressed in pale-pink satin coat and breeches with a white waistcoat and white ruffles, the whole suit picked out with green trimmings, tapped with his slender little cane in the midst of a great patch of yellow jonquils saying:

“Tippy, tippy, tip tap;
Open to us, Feathercap,
Open to our waiting band
The Jonquil Door to Fairyland!
Twice I knock, and twice I rap,
Tippy, tippy, tip tap!”

There was a rustling and nodding of yellow heads as the jonquils separated, much as if they had grown on an old-fashioned outside cellar door; one half tilted over sideways to the right, the other to the left, and up popped a little fairy dressed in jonquil yellow, with a beautiful, feathery-looking plume of green in his cap which he took from his head as he made a profound bow. Little Knight hesitated about going farther—his weight would likely wreck the whole stairway—but the little jonquil fairy waved his feathered cap before him, and suddenly he felt himself shrinking till he looked like the Little Knight who had found the robin’s nest so roomy that first night he spent in the forest.

The fairies were delighted with him in his diminished state, and after Feathercap closed and locked the door, they descended the steps. Such a beautiful stairway it was! It made several turns by means of broad platforms

and balconies, from which different views of Fairyland were gained, each seeming more entrancing than the last; and on the platforms, the stairs, the balconies, wherever they would add to the charm of the surroundings, were clusters of the beautiful yellow flowers for which it was named, in odd-shaped jars and bowls, some of bronze, some of terra cotta, and others of dull olive-green crockery, making the Jonquil Stair a place to be remembered with pleasure.

Little Knight could never describe his first visit to Fairyland. Everything was so exquisitely, so wonderfully, beautiful! There was a broad lagoon, near the entrance to the Jonquil Stair, from which velvety terraces sloped upward to magnificent palaces. Boats made of water lilies and manned by gondoliers in green and gold; others of scalloped seashells with gayly garbed oarsmen; tree boughs fashioned into frail canoes, paddled along by crimson and brown-clad little fairies!

And flowers! Of all kinds—in greatest profusion, but no confusion—all was artistic or picturesque, seemingly undesigned; everywhere the effect was of lightness, the airy-fairyness of which mortals sometimes dream, seldom approach, and never realize—for it is only to be found in Fairyland! But in the way of landscapes, of houses—cottages, castles, or palaces, in the arts or the trades, everything that mortals possess, the fairies possess in a more delicate, beautiful form—this aside from their powers of magic! No wonder it all seemed a dream to Little Knight as soon as he left it; a vague, intangible dream; too vast, too wonderful, for mortal tongue to tell, though he could see it whenever he shut his eyes!

And while he was their guest he was monarch of all he surveyed; his wishes were anticipated, each little fairy vying with the other to wait upon him, to amuse him; and he was kept busy assuring them that he would pay them many visits when the Magic Jewel was restored to the King.

He had a suite of rooms in the Queen's own palace, which included a bathroom which delighted him, for besides the usual arrangements there was a swimming pool, filled with a faintly fragrant and very refreshing water, where he and Prince Joli had a splendid half hour's sport. The bed and all the furniture was carved from mother-of-pearl, and the dreamiest music lulled him to sleep; such a sweet, delicious sleep with a strange dream that greatly impressed him.

He dreamed that he had gone to bed and had been sleeping a couple of hours when he felt a light touch on his shoulder. He opened his eyes instantly, wide awake, with not even a desire for a yawn and stretch; nor was he one bit frightened when he saw a bright light, like a star, shining in the middle of the open window, and not a fairy in sight, nothing to account for the wakening touch! But he felt no surprise, and arose and followed the light as a matter of course, finding a stairway leading from the window sill to the garden below. He descended without the least wonder as to how it came there, though he knew there had been no sign of it when he retired. But things do happen that way in dreams! The light kept floating on ahead of him, out of the garden, on and on—till suddenly he found himself in the forest; the light flashed between two trees, flickered and went out! Hurrying after it he saw he was in a beautiful dell which was

hedged in by a thick growth of jonquils which formed a complete circle around it, like a ring of gold. Instead of grass, the softest, greenest moss grew in the Ring, and in the exact center was a regular "woods" fire made of fagots; over it from cross sticks, in true gypsy style, swung a chubby, round-sided little black pot which was begin-



"From the shadows came the tiniest little old woman he had ever seen."

ning to bubble and sputter just as he stepped out of the wood. He was wondering if it was a fairy gypsy camp, when from the shadows came the tiniest little old woman he had ever seen, with cats without number jumping all around her. They were every one coal black, and as soon as the little old woman stepped inside the circle, they ranged themselves around close to the jonquil stalks, sitting as near together as they could get—the circle was a

very strange one with the yellow and green eyes blazing out from the black faces over which the yellow flowers nodded their heads! But Little Knight was absorbed in the little old woman; she looked just like the Mother Goose witch who went to sweep the cobwebs out of the sky, only being a fairy, her size made her too cute for anything. She wore a short jacket with long, open, flaring sleeves, over a bodice of bright scarlet. Her skirt was round and full, scarcely reaching her shoetops; skirt and jacket were black, lined with a warm scarlet which matched her bodice, and were trimmed with lizards, speckled toads and frogs, cats' heads, spiders and snakes—in vivid greens and yellows and reds and blues. Snakes were even twined around her high, sharp-peaked hat; but despite the snakes and all, Little Knight felt no fear of her; in fact, it seemed to him it was in his behalf she was working, though apparently she had no idea he was there, for she never looked toward him, as she bent over the little round black pot, stirring it with a queer-looking spotted stick or wand, which might be a petrified snake or possibly her broomstick with a snake-skin cover, and incanting in a sing-song, monotonous tone,

“ Brew, brew,
Herbs of dew.
In owl's eyes
The knowledge lies!
Maids arise,
With true replies.
Brew, brew,
Maids of Dew.
Time flies,
Arise, arise,
Maids of Dew,
I conjure you! ”

Over and over she sang this song in the even, monotonous tone; and suddenly, as she stirred, a thick white smoke rolled out of the little black pot in fantastic writhings. As he watched, it turned into a number of beautiful maidens with the glitter of dewdrops in their long golden hair, in the folds of their long floating draperies, and in the petals of the white roses which formed a thick rope by which they were linked together. Gracefully festooning the rope from hand to hand, they circled around the little witch and dancing or rather floating, for they seemed to tread not earth but air, they sang in voices of silvery music:

“ He who would find the maiden fair,
 Alone, must climb the Dragon’s Stair;
 One hundred steps from first to last
 After the Dragon has been passed.
 Right, left, or back a glance cast he,
 And Dragon’s Fire his fate shall be!
 But if temptation he defies,
 And steadfast, forward, keeps his eyes,
 And fleet of foot and staunch of soul,
 Press onward, upward to the goal,
 In marble walls of Castle Grim,
 The maiden fair shall welcome him!
 Once he shall step in castle hall,
 From it the Gnome King’s power shall fall;
 And those within, while in they be,
 From magic art then shall be free.

Rewarded thus who shall aspire,
 And conquer the fell Dragon’s Fire! ”

Over and over, like the little witch with her incantation, they sang these words, then suddenly, quick as a

wink, the whole scene vanished—little witch, magic pot, Maids of Dew, black cat circle with its fringe of jonquils and all—and Little Knight awoke with a start, and was amazed to find himself in the beautiful mother-of-pearl bed; he was sure he ought to be out in the forest; he rubbed his eyes and gradually the incidents of the day before returned to his mind, and he remembered where he was. He must have been dreaming. But the song of the little Maids of Dew still echoed in his brain and he was delighted to find he could repeat every word, for he wished to tell his strange dream to the fairies. As they gathered around him at breakfast he did so. His interested little auditors glanced at each other in astonishment every now and then as he proceeded, and when he finished Prince Joli said:

“The Little Witch you describe did really belong to our band, Little Knight; we called her Mother Heart-of-Gold, she was so kind, and in the spring we said the jonquils ran after her, for they bloomed in her footsteps. She was dearly loved by our good Queen, to whom in turn she was so attached that when Her Majesty disappeared she was almost broken-hearted; and if fairies ever died I am sure she would have. She kept her little pot and her Maids of Dew as busy as she dared, though they seemed to bring her no consolation, till finally, about fifty years reckoning by mortal time, from the day our dear Queen disappeared, little Mother Heart-of-Gold vanished, leaving no word or trace behind her. We are sure that for her to have done so would have jeopardized her chances to help Her Majesty, for she was too kind-hearted to worry us unnecessarily. There is no doubt that the vision which you thought a dream is real. Some way or other the Little Witch has

been able to communicate with you. You will find Castle Grim with its hundred steps and its Fiery Dragon. How you shall conquer it you must yourself decide; had it been possible to further aid you Mother Heart-of-Gold would have done so."

"I am delighted with the information she has already given me in her warnings. I shall be sure of three things now, that I would have had to learn myself: if I find a marble castle I shall know the Little Princess is within; that I have a terrible dragon to conquer before I can enter; that when I do force my way inside its walls, she and all the inmates will be free from the Gnomes' power as long as they stay within the castle—and supposing I did come across the castle, entered it and found the Little Princess, without the Little Witch's warning—I would be afraid to stay there, and so we would likely leave our refuge and put ourselves in the Gnomes' power again if they should catch us; again, if I found out about the magic being lifted from the inmates, I would likely suppose they would be free no matter where they were and we might go right out and fall into their hands without even trying to escape—why, she has helped me wonderfully," concluded Little Knight, "and be assured, dear little friends, that the very first time I press my ring after I succeed in gaining the marble castle, I shall send you a token to let you know that the Dragon has been conquered!"

"Goody!" cried the little Maids of Honor, "let it be our hateful chain, which we did not have a chance to send to you. Take it, Little Knight, and when you storm Castle Grim and find your Little Princess, return it to us after your first meal."

“I should think the order would be proof of that,” said Prince Joli with a twinkle in his eye, “unless Little Knight becomes most dreadfully selfish and wishes for only enough for one, leaving the Little Princess standing by with a wishful look on her face!”

They all laughed at this idea, but Little Knight took the chain anyway, “to make sure and certain!” he said.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FIERY DRAGON

WITH the best of good wishes Little Knight went on his way directly after breakfast was over.

As he trudged along in the wake of his faithful little quills and thought over the song of the Little Maids of Dew, he cudgeled his brain trying to evolve some scheme whereby to outwit, or do away with, the Dragon. Once he took from his bosom a small trinket Prince Joli had given him when they parted. It was a diamond, pear-shaped, and hollowed out to form a round-bottomed bottle about an inch long; it had a tiny gold-screw top, and held just one whiff of a precious fairy perfume which would put any Gnome to sleep for a day and a night. But he could think of no way in which it would help him with the Dragon, so after looking at the beautiful jewel he put it carefully in his bosom again.

He had scarcely done so when "Slap!" his little monitor warned him of danger near. He heard voices, and a few moments later saw the tops of the queerly shaped hoods of two Gnomes coming straight toward him. The tree he was under was full of foliage and afforded a splendid refuge; in less than no time he was safely hidden in its friendly arms.

They were a funny-looking little pair. One was fat, oh, so chubby! everything about him was round—his head,

his face, his nose, his eyes, his mouth, his very cheeks; his body, his legs—the calves of which seemed to touch each other, and, in fact, encroached on his shins so that they looked round too! The other was round in the body, but, unlike his companion's, his legs were thin—oh, so thin, they seemed actually to bend under him; both had such vividly ruddy complexions and seemed to have so much trouble getting over the ground, that when they stopped a short distance away and gravely brought forth and drank from a short black bottle, Little Knight was not a bit surprised; though he was very much so, and dismayed too, when they stopped again directly under his tree and sitting down propped themselves against its trunk, and looked as though they intended to stay there the rest of the day! But when they began to talk he became more reconciled.

“Tricksy's lost his reputation this time,” said the round one.

“And such a little duffer's outwitted him! If Sharpwit doesn't succeed in catching him, Goromogore will be ready to put us all in chains.”

“If it wasn't for leaving the forest I would be glad to see the little duffer win out. Sharpy's getting unbearable—orders me around like old shoes! After raising the fire under old Craggy the other day and working like a mere mortal to do it, I stopped to take the least bit of a nip, and he came down on me like a regular furybones! ‘Guzzle-mug,’ says he, ‘not another drop till that pesky little mortal's taken!’ as if he were Goromogore himself!”

“And you're obeying him finely!” they both chuckled in a maudlin way. Then the thin-legged one yawned mightily, and continued: “Right you are, Guzzlemug, Sharpwit will be worse than Tricksy if the duffer's caught

in any of his traps; but we don't want to be banished to the little old scrubby mountain we came from, so we're bound to help him; and it would be better not to take more than is necessary to keep up your tone."

"But I am so 'high-toned'!" and they both laughed again.

"Let me take another nip," said the round one.

"Wobblejug will never go back on you, Guzzie." There was some more maudlin talk, but nothing to throw any light on the things most interesting to Little Knight; after a few more "nips" from the black bottle, their heads drooped lower and lower.

"My, but it's warm!" said Wobblejug, and with a last effort he dragged off his cloak and hood.

In another five minutes Little Knight ventured to climb from the tree. Softly he stepped across the grass and was out of range of the Gnomes, when suddenly he hesitated. A moment later, his quills bobbing gayly ahead, he walked cautiously but determinedly back over the way he had come. While yet out of sight of the sleeping pair the little pointer flew "slap" against his fingers, but though he tried to go even more softly, and stopped to take a good look before venturing from his shelter, he felt sure their presence was the only danger against which he had to guard.

Wobblejug and Guzzlemug were sleeping sweetly, and having pleasant dreams, to judge by their expression. Getting down on his hands and knees, Little Knight crawled, without making the least noise, toward them; then came the delicate part of the business. He determined to possess himself of the cloak Wobblejug had discarded! It would help disguise him and perhaps with its aid he might

be able to safely pass through some danger. With utmost care he lifted the garment, and not waiting to fold it,



“Wobblejug and Guzzlemug were sleeping sweetly.”

tossed it over his shoulder, and quickly made good his escape.

Little Knight did not stop to lunch; though miles

away from the spot, he would not risk losing a moment's time. He had already lost a half hour in the tree; that would have to answer for the rest he usually took at mid-day; but he wished for a sandwich and a couple of apples, and in a moment a good-sized, tempting looking one with the pale green of tender lettuce showing through the brown-crust bread was in his hand, and two big red apples that made his mouth water just to look at, bulged out his pockets.

It was shortly after this that he caught a glimpse of the mountains whose slopes soon showed the feathery green of spring leaves; and about three o'clock his quills slapped against his fingers and refused to be dislodged.

Little Knight took this as a sign that they were nearing the Gnome headquarters, and climbing the tallest tree he could pick out, he was soon in its topmost branches, gazing eagerly toward the green heights in hopes of locating the marble castle. Vainly he looked, however, all along its clear-cut summit, for he fancied it would be built in the most inaccessible spot. He was turning to climb down, disappointed, when a glimmer of white caught his eye. Yes, that must be it—right at the mountain's base, and in a straight line of vision! He could distinguish the turrets at either end. His heart beat with suffocating rapidity; even had he come upon it without hearing the warning of the Maids of Dew, he would have been excited, but knowing the Little Princess dwelt a prisoner therein, added a hundredfold to the tumult of his feelings. Would he ever be able to reach her he wondered.

Hastily and carefully descending, he made his way with utmost caution toward Castle Grim. An hour's slow but steady traveling and he was as near as he dared go

without a better knowledge of his surroundings. Again he climbed the tallest tree and took a survey.

The castle presented a long, square-topped front without ornamentation, except for the square turrets at each corner which stood out several feet from the main body of the building, and towered a story above its roof. The Dragon's Stair was a grand flight of one hundred steps, broad and low, which led to a great doorway fashioned in three square-topped sections; an immense one in the center, narrower, but yet large ones, each side. The stairway, as was the whole castle, was of pure white marble, unadorned, but polished so highly it seemed to glitter in the sun, whose rays burnished it to gold, to rose, and even to purple hues. Rows of high, square-topped and square-silled windows crossing the entire front, showed there were three floors above the staircase and two below.

Castle Grim was, indeed, an impressive building. The Dragon's Stair with its broad, flat, square banisters a wonder to behold; and when was considered the size of the architects the marvel became more than marvelous. Little Knight forgot the Dragon at first, but when he had settled every detail of the immense structure in his mind, he looked around for him, but apparently he was nowhere in sight; he saw nothing that looked the least like a dragon to him! However, he determined not to do anything hastily; so much depended upon his success at this point.

He soon had reason to congratulate himself on his resolution, for suddenly there was a stir on the ground at the foot of the stairway, and a dozen or more little objects which he concluded were Gnomes, for from that dis-

tance they looked no more than a foot high, swarmed up the steps, and others appeared from around the sides of the castle. They seemed to have nothing special to do, but Little Knight guessed they were on guard. They promenaded in twos and threes; groups stood sociably chatting; then seemingly they all vanished, but Little Knight had kept one particular couple in view, and observed that they went only as far as a fringe of bushes that grew just at the outer edge of the line of trees, and squatting down were instantly merged into the landscape. He had no doubt that the others were concealed in like manner. Had he gone straight ahead he would be in in their clutches by this. Settling himself more comfortably in the tree, he prepared to await the appearance of the Dragon, which must be somewhere near the castle, for the Maids of Dew had sung:

“One hundred steps from first to last,
After the Dragon has been passed.”

Finally, in what was to him the longest half hour of his life, he caught a movement in the immense middle door and slowly, slowly, came to view the most terrible-looking object he had ever heard tell of. From where he was, it looked like nothing but a great head, the face of which was about seven feet high and five across. Directly under the chin were two webbed feet. On top of the head grew a horn or great cone, sharp point upward, and from either side of this horn its arms started and reached downward till they ended in great webbed hands, which, however, it was using now as feet, to walk upon. Two long eyes slanted up toward its temples. Its ears were under its arms, and from one to the other stretched

its immense mouth, which showed double rows of teeth, the uppers and lowers of one set interlocking like the edges of two saws placed together, while those of the other set were long and curved and sharp, the uppers protruding between those of the unders like two rows of spikes. The face was of a pale, almost white drab; the eyes were bright green shot with streaks of red; how the nose was constructed Little Knight could not make out, but it looked like nothing more than a great roll in the middle of the whitey-drab expanse.

For a moment this great head and face remained framed in the doorway, a hideous picture to behold, then slowly, slowly it advanced, and he saw there was a body attached to it—yards and yards of body, of a Nile green. He wondered at last if there was any end to it, as serpent-wise it crawled down the stair in long waves; but when the feet rested on the grass at the lower end of the Staircase, he saw the tip of the tail was at the top step, just outside the door. Then slowly the Dragon began to turn and at last had taken what was, presumably, the position it kept when on guard—straight across the stairway, reaching from banister to banister! Lying thus, it faced the length of the road that swept the mountain's base, instead of the trees where Little Knight was sheltered.

No sooner had it stretched itself across the pathway to the stair than the Gnomes again appeared; they approached the hideous thing fearlessly, patted and caressed it, then all in a bunch went rapidly toward the left along the road. Evidently they felt quite satisfied that Castle Grim was safe under their pet's protection. When the last flutter of their russet cloaks was lost sight of, Little Knight's gaze came back to his foe. He noticed that it

was shaped like a crocodile and had three rows of the sharp-pointed horns or cones down its back, one directly in the center pointing straight up, the others just at the turn from side to back leaning a little outward. When it was settled to its satisfaction, it stretched its arms skyward, and tiny white sparks came flying from every cone, from its eyes and the corners of its mouth! And then Little Knight saw why its nose looked so queer, for suddenly it unrolled, reached far out like an elephant's trunk, and wrapped itself around a bush growing at least ten feet away; up it came, roots and all, was lifted high in the air, and flung backward till it struck the earth about as far beyond the tip of the tail as it had been beyond its nose before it had unrolled. Then again the arms were uplifted, sparks showered from each cone, from the eyes and mouth—and suddenly Squatty's and Cheerful's talk came back to him—old Hornyback and his devil's fire, one whiff of which had rendered poor Hollowpate unconscious, turned him black and blue, and blinded him for two days! Often he had wondered what they had meant—Hornyback and his devil's fire! There he was before him! He was the Dragon he had to conquer! He repeated the first part of the warning the maids of Dew had sung:

“He who would find the maiden fair,
 Alone must climb the Dragon's Stair.
 One hundred steps from first to last,
 After the Dragon has been passed.
 Right, left or back a glance cast he,
 And Dragon's Fire his fate shall be!”

If he should succeed in passing the terrible thing, he must bear well in mind that line, “Right, left or back a

glance cast he," and no matter what the temptation, press onward to the goal. His heart beat fast as he thought of it; but first he must settle on some plan to pass him! He looked as hard as shell; no common weapon could penetrate that hide, he felt sure; but he was accustomed to seeing the Gnomes around him! Faster beat Little Knight's heart as a scheme, little by little, unfolded itself in his mind.

He continued to watch the Dragon till he thought he understood the way it worked. It seemed when its arms were stretched upward the sparks flew, but the trunklike nose remained rolled close to the face; and when the trunk was reaching out around, the arms were resting, hands on ground, and the horns failed to give forth the fatal fire. Even from where he was, the smoke which rose in the upper air had a sort of sharp, metallic, sulphurous smell that must nearly choke anyone who inhaled it unawares. He concluded that the arms and nose worked alternately.

Old Hornyback, finding he was in good condition, finally subsided and lay quite still with only an occasional twitch of the tail and a sleepy blink of the long, green, catlike eyes.

CHAPTER XX

LITTLE KNIGHT STORMS CASTLE GRIM

WHEN Little Knight thought the demonstration of fireworks was over for the present, he descended from his observatory, took off his own hat and cape, secured them under his belt, and donning Wobblejug's quaint cloak and hood, became in appearance a full-fledged Gnome. With great care he made his way, always keeping in the shelter of the trees, to a point opposite to that where the uprooted bush lay. Here he tried his trusty little danger signal and to his joy it went bobbing along ahead of him. It took but a few minutes to reach the bush, and trimming it off till he could easily shoulder it, he made hastily toward the Dragon. Slap! But he had expected that, and kept straight on. He intended to take his enemy by surprise.

When within a yard of its head he lowered the bush to an upright position in front of him, then turning sideways, with quick, beating heart, but quicker footsteps, he made a dash to pass the monster's hideous face.

As soon as the Dragon caught sight of the moving object it threw up its arms with a squeal sharp and high and shrill, so unexpected, so unearthly, and so liable to bring every inhabitant of Gnomeland to the rescue, it froze the marrow in Little Knight's bones.

The fire ascended in yellow-greenish flames followed

by the choking sulphurous smoke, then the trunklike nose commenced to unroll. Little Knight had just reached this point, and with the inspiration of desperation, thrusting with all his might the rustling bush into the demon-like face which was vomiting fire and smoke at every pore, he fled for his life and gained the stair, ere the Dragon recovered from the surprise of the onslaught. It had immediately gobbled the bush, which was tangled in its teeth; this increased its rage but gave Little Knight the one moment necessary to reach the stair. He had just placed his foot on the lower step when the Dragon succeeded in freeing itself of its unlucky bite. It lashed its tail in fury, gave utterance to the terrifying squeals again, but for a second, dazed by the sight of the familiar brown of the Gnome's cloak, it made no effort to follow Little Knight, fleeing desperately up the long flight of steps.

Then the noise of the lashing tail, the puffing of fire and smoke, the terrible squeals, was mingled with shouts which seemed to come from hundreds of throats and assailing Little Knight's ears almost distracted him. Had it not been for the warning he would surely have looked back; the temptation to do so was almost unendurable—he felt he must yield to it! But with strained gaze he pressed on, on, upward to the goal. The calves of his legs ached terribly, for his nerves and muscles also were strained to the highest tension of excitement. The stair seemed to have no end; the last few steps wavered before his eyes—now there were but three to take—now two—another—and in a second he passed over the threshold, his footsteps resounded loud and clanging through the great domed marble hall of Castle Grim!

He caught a blurred glimpse of a spotted fawn stand-

ing under a beautiful palm a short distance from the entrance, then fell panting and exhausted just beyond the sill. When he opened his eyes a few moments later, a woman stood where the fawn had been; but so wrought up was he with excitement and wonder as to what was going on outside, he gave no thought to the interior.

When he turned the sight that met his gaze made his heart stand still for a couple of beats—the end of the Dragon's all-clutching trunk which, like the suckers of an octopus clung to everything within reach, was feeling along the marble of the top step not two feet away from him! Involuntarily he drew back with the instinct of flight, when the song of the Maids of Dew returned to him—the doorsill was the magic line beyond which now the Gnome King's power could not cross!

In the meantime, the woman stood as though fascinated, eyes staring, a look of horror on her face.

The Dragon, wrought to the highest pitch of fury, was lashing its tail, and alternately vomiting forth its venomous fire and smoke and throwing out its tenacious, far-reaching trunk; but as it drew its body farther up the stairway and tried to enter, every time the end of its trunk struck the doorsill, it flew up and back as if it had come against a stone wall instead of the open doorway. At last, with a hideous, prolonged scream, sharper, shriller than any that had gone before, its body reared upright on the curve of its tail; there was one glimpse of the hundreds of webbed feet underneath, clinging close to the greenish-white skin, ere it fell backward; there was a loud crash and report that rattled every window in the castle and dense clouds of sulphurous smoke, intershot with yellow, greenish-blue flames rose to the sky!

When the volumes of smoke lifted far enough from the ground Little Knight saw dozens of little russet bundles lying around the now motionless Fire Dragon. They were strewn about in heaps, and in every manner and position; he was puzzling as to what they could be when suddenly they came to life; there was a mighty kicking and waving of legs and arms which finally began to right themselves and showed that a pair of each belonged to a very-much-dazed and very-much-crestfallen little Gnome!

He was laughing at their antics when he felt a hand clutch his shoulder and a terrified voice said:

"The Gnomes! The Gnomes! Whoever you are they will be after you. Come, we will try to hide you!" Looking round, Little Knight saw the woman whom he remembered vaguely as standing under the palm—a woman of his own kind—a mortal!

"No, they cannot harm me as long as I remain in the castle!" he hastened to assure her before satisfying his own curiosity. "See! I have succeeded in passing the Dragon—he is conquered! I have come up the Dragon's Stair, and the Gnome King will never again have power to practice his magic arts on the castle or any who remain within its walls!" As he spoke a wondering light broke over the woman's face; she gazed slowly down her whole length, then dropped to her knees, and with clasped hands and streaming eyes raised to heaven, poured forth an ecstasy of joy and thankfulness.

Little Knight raised his hand reverently to remove his hat, and took hold of the Gnome's hood which he had forgotten he was wearing. He bowed his head and silently uttered his thanksgiving also, then suddenly found himself clasped in two womanly arms. Though only a

few days, it seemed, oh, so long since he had felt such an embrace, since he had looked into mortal eyes; and in a moment he was just a boy, a glad little boy again, and he threw his arms about the woman's neck and gave her a regular boy hug! Then:

"You're Letty, aren't you?" asked he.

"Yes, I'm Letty—and who may you be, my brave little fellow?" said she, pleased and astonished at once; his impulsive boyishness along with the looks of him, had won a place for him in her heart which not even her gratitude to him as her deliverer from the Gnome King's power could have gained and which nothing would ever change.

"I am only another out on the Quest, Letty, first for the Little Princess, her nurse, and my dear father, next the Magic Jewel of the Forest."

"Oh, my dear, dear boy," cried Letty rapturously, "you are the only one who has ever been able to penetrate farther than the outermost bounds of the forest before coming under the Gnome King's spell! How on earth did you accomplish it! How are their dear Majesties? Many and many's the time my heart has bled for them through these terrible years!"

"They are well, Letty, but, oh, so sad! almost broken-hearted; only you know how brave they are and how they bear up for the sake of their subjects. But first take me to the Little Princess, and I will tell everything, for I am sure you will both want to know the same things and it will save time. I have still much to do before the forest is freed!"

"Oh, will you put yourself in the way of getting under their power again? Oh, my dear boy!" but Letty

rose, and they walked toward the other end of the vast hall, which was superbly beautiful.

It was high and wide, with great chandeliers hanging from the vaulted ceiling. Forest scenes, with fairies, nymphs, and gnomes were exquisitely carved in relief on the marble panels of the side walls; an aisle between two rows of beautiful spreading palms went straight up the center and was carpeted with the richest moss-green carpet, from which Little Knight was tempted to pick the roses which in twos, singly, and in clusters strewed its length, till he tried it and found the flowers were velvet, too, and were woven in to stay! He laughed merrily at his mistake.

"They are certainly little wonders when it comes to doing things!" said he. Letty nodded.

"They are demons!" said she in a fierce whisper, for she was not yet able to realize she was now as free as when at home in her own good King's palace.

They turned to the left into another great hall which crossed the main one, and was equally beautiful; mounted a marble stairway to a gallery, and again turning from that into a corridor which ran parallel to the entrance hall, Letty opened a door to the right and Little Knight, eager for his first glimpse of the Little Princess, gazed into a room the like of which he had never dreamed.

It was done in pale shades of pink, and in white. The furniture, which was at once the oddest and most beautiful, the most grotesque, yet attractive, was made entirely of glass! Glass in pink shades that seemed to commence with a rich deep rose in the heart—as, for instance, the curved legs of a great armchair which first caught Little Knight's eye—and paled out to almost clear crystal on

the surface. But he did not wait to gaze and admire. He followed Letty to the other end of the room which shone a veritable bower of beauty. Here a great window let in the yellow sunlight amid a riotous mass of apple boughs in full blossom; the fresh green of their leaves relieved the pink tint of the room, and gave it the one touch—in reality the “magic touch”—which perfected its beauty.

In this bower, leaning on the window sill, her face close pressed to the bars, which were carved to represent strands of pink roses, Little Knight saw the long-sought Little Princess! His heart beat quickly, but motioning Letty to proceed without him, he stepped behind a great branch of fragrant bloom.

“Well, lovey,” said Letty, trying to keep the excitement out of her voice.

“Oh, Letty, is it you? Come here, come quick! Something has happened!” Without turning, so wrapped was she in what was going on outside, she put out her hand, beckoning behind her. “I can’t quite make out what it is—the Gnomes are running in all directions like a lot of distracted ants—there must have been some kind of an accident for they are carrying some of them past; and awhile ago—did you hear it, Letty?—there was such a noise—terrible! The windows rattled—I was so afraid you might get hurt—I thought that perhaps those poor men had found means to get away from those terrible little people, and, oh, my heart most broke, Letty, because you were not here, for I would not want to escape without you! I wonder, oh, I wonder, Letty, what it can mean—I—” and then the Little Princess turned, and seeing Letty standing there before her, her eyes almost

started from her head; then a look of happiness that actually made her face beam came into them, and clasping her hands ecstatically, she half screamed, half sobbed, "Oh, Letty, my own dear Letty!" and was lost in the fond nurse's arms, while such a passion of sobs and tears shook her frail little body that Little Knight could scarcely keep from rushing out to try to calm her, which Letty, though she was crying too, was already doing, with loving pats and caresses, and her soothing:

"There, there, my darling, Letty's own little lamb!" And while he was quite mystified as to the cause of the storm, for though when she spoke she had been very much excited, her voice was far removed from tears, he knew it was a happy one, and determined to let Letty reveal his presence.

"Oh, Letty, my own dear Letty, has Goromogore relented?"

"No, no, darling, not he." And Letty's glance was dark and fierce. "No, no—only, sweetheart, the old Fire Dragon's dead—broke himself into pieces with rage, and burned a hole in the ground to bury himself in—and the magic is gone from the castle!"

"And you won't ever be changed into a fawn again!" What a ring of jubilation was in her voice!

Then rushed back to Little Knight the dim memory of the spotted fawn standing under the palm, where a few moments later Letty appeared; the sudden flash of knowledge dazed him and turned him cold; this phase of the wicked Gnome's power opened up such vistas of dreadful things endured by those who fell under his spell! But through it all he heard Letty's answer:

"No, dearie, no, honey, leastwise as long as I stay in

the castle and—more happiness to me—that dreadful old Goromogore will never again be able to set foot within these walls without a special invitation!”

“Oh, Letty! Oh, Letty! Oh, Let-ty!” The Little Princess’s eyes were as round as her exclamations. “How



“Oh, Letty, my own dear Letty.”

did it happen—and the poor men, then they are not free!” And the joyousness dropped from her voice, for, like Little Knight, the Little Princess thought of others even amid her own happiness.

“How did it happen? Ah, well, my pretty, it’s a tale

that's mighty interesting to hear! I was standing at the door——"

"As you are, Letty, or——" Letty nodded.

"Not as I am, no; just as I was when I left you. I was wishing for the hundred-millionth time that the forest would be burned down or be torn up by the roots, or that something would happen to free my little mistress from the wicked Gnome King's power, when I saw one of the horrid little creatures creeping along with a bush that nearly covered him, over his shoulder. I wondered what fresh bedevilment he was up to, and determined to find out all I could about him; it was just after old Hornyback had been set on guard, and all at once I saw his villainous tail beginning to flap and he looked uneasy; then my eyes wandered back to the bush-buried Gnome, and didn't I see the creature running sideways in front of the demon; old Hornyback was that riled he commenced his awful fire and smoke puffing, and began to unroll that snoot of his; my heart jumped for the little creature, and what do you think he did but thrust the bush right into the old Dragon's face before he could get his snoot unrolled one lap! And for the stairs he flew lickety-split, without once turning his head to see what was going on behind; though how he managed to do that, I never can tell, for such a commotion as there was no one will ever describe! Old Hornyback fairly vomited smoke and fire, while the mountain seemed to vomit Gnomes! I never saw so many of the little demons at once all hooting and shouting to attract the fleeing one's attention; but I thought he must be stone deaf, for not the lash of an eye did he turn toward them—only lickety-split, lickety-split, flew his legs

up the stairs, and it was well he didn't pause one iota of a second or he would have been caught by the snoot of the old Dragon who was after him hot foot—and indeed, it must have been terrible hot feet he had, for he seemed a mass of flames—and the queer little Gnome was just inside the door, no more, when the snoot of him was feeling all over the step; I wondered why he didn't come in—but he couldn't get in!" The Little Princess was now sitting straight up in the nurse's lap, eyes, mouth, and ears, all interest in every word.

"The little Gnome!" she exclaimed; she couldn't say another word for excitement.

"I looked then, he was so tuckered out he fell in a little brown bunch as soon as he crossed the doorsill; and some way, I felt glad he had escaped, even if he was one of our tormentors; he was so brave; then he looked up and I saw he wasn't a Gnome at all, but a boy, honey, a real, mortal boy, the dearest, sweetest, bravest boy, the most beautiful boy I ever laid eyes on!" Little Knight, listening under the apple blossoms, blushed till his face matched the pinkness of the room.

"Oh, Letty, he was just like my Little Knight, wasn't he—but I forgot—you didn't really see him, only he was like what I've told you, wasn't he?" said the little girl, and Little Knight's eyes shone with delight; she had remembered him through all her strange experiences! It seemed too good to be true!

Yes, Letty had often heard of him, for the Little Princess made her "Little Knight" the hero of many a tale of childish romance, and now she nodded an assent, though in her heart she did not really think he could compare with the brave, beautiful boy who had caused the

death of the fiery Dragon, and freed the castle from the Gnome King's power. She continued her story:

"Then Hornyback, beside himself with fury, raised up on his tail till you could see all his horrible, webby feet close to his clammy body, like a serpent's. He gave a last fearful scream, the fire and smoke poured from him; I suppose he must have bursted some of his inside works, for all at once he lost his balance and fell backward clear down the stair! The Gnomes you saw carried by were overcome by the smoke; you know it blinds anyone for a while if it gets in his eyes, and though these rascals can't be killed while the forest is under their enchantment, it's a consolation to know they can be put out of the way of doing mischief for a time, anyway!"

"Yes, yes, Letty, but the boy—oh, they didn't get him!" clasping her hands and looking imploringly at the nurse who hastened to reply:

"No, oh, no—and I was at my wits' end, for I was sure they would be after him in a minute and did not know where to hide him, but I ran to him and wanted him to come away with me; then he told me that the castle was freed from the Gnomes—I never noticed till then that I was myself again—and didn't I hug him!"

"But where is he? How did he get here?" Innumerable questions were eager to drop from the Little Princess's lips, but Letty ended them by saying:

"He's here, waiting for me to break the news to you!"

CHAPTER XXI

LITTLE KNIGHT AND THE LOST PRINCESS

LITTLE KNIGHT stepped forth—the Little Princess gave one look into his face, cried:

“My Little Knight, oh, my dear Little Knight,” and fairly flew from the astonished Letty’s lap, and with arms outstretched flung herself into Little Knight’s welcoming embrace. Ah, this was something like! At the time Sharpwit had impersonated the Little Princess at the cottage in the forest, her supposed aloofness had vaguely disappointed Little Knight. But this was the real Little Princess, the warm-hearted little girl he had fancied she was!

The first raptures of the meeting over, holding him tightly by the hand, she turned to Letty, saying rather reproachfully:

“Oh, Letty, Letty, didn’t you know him after all I told you—and you always said,” a glint of humor coming into her eyes, “that you ‘would know his hide on a bush’!”

“I know,” said Letty with compunction, though smiling too, “but I never really expected to see it there when I said it—and when I did, he was disguised as a Gnome!” So light-hearted were they that this seemed the best joke they had ever heard and they laughed till their sides ached. Then they settled themselves comfortably in the fragrant bower and spent two full hours, questioning and

relating, till all that had happened in the Kingdom and the forest was known by the two captives. What exclamations Little Knight's adventures called forth! He showed them the little bunch of feathers, the frog skin, the danger pointers, and the steel chain, which they handled with awe, almost reverence.

"Oh, I love them, the dear things!" exclaimed the Little Princess rapturously, "and when we get back home they shall always be kept safe, shan't they, Little Knight?"

"But you must be nearly famished!" remarked Letty, then looked astounded, for her hospitality had received a sudden check. "I wonder if we shall be able to find anything to eat! Old Goromogore will starve us out, but I know where the pantry is, and if all goes to all, I'll go out and forage."

"No, no!" cried the Little Princess, terrified at the bare thought. "I would rather starve—Letty, dear Letty, don't go! He will be sure to catch you and I'll never see you again!"

"There is no need to worry," said Little Knight, who had suppressed the story of the fairy napkin ring so that he might give them a grand surprise. "Just tell me what you would like to have for dinner, Little Princess."

"What I would like?" said she, laughing gayly, and naming a whole list of good things. "But, Little Knight," she ended, "you must not risk being caught either. We will hunt up all there is to eat in the castle and portion it off as they do in shipwrecks. They didn't have time to take anything away with them."

"We needn't eat any of their things if we don't choose

to—just show me where you wish to dine.” Feeling there was some mystery, but ready to enter into the sport, both arose and Little Knight followed them to the lower hall by a stairway at the other end of the gallery. Turning to the right, they opened the first door they came to, and he was ushered into a magnificent dining room, or salon, for it was calculated to accommodate a great number of people.

As everywhere else in the castle, the ceiling was high, the walls of beautifully carved marble panels. Great chandeliers were here also, and the furniture was of glass, in amber tints which began with a rich brown in the center, graduating to a pale yellow. It was massive and beautiful. Two large sideboards were laden with all sorts of articles, some of which Little Knight could not even name. An immense table stood in the middle of the room, with others conveniently placed for emergencies; there were several cabinets, some holding china, some glass, all regulation size, not small as the Gnomes’ belongings would be supposed to be. Indeed, in the lowermost shelf of one of the cabinets was a dish so extra large that Little Knight doubted if its match could be found in the land of mortals. It looked like a great soup tureen, being a covered oval, deep and long, with heavy ornamental handles at either end and on the lid, the same ornaments being repeated more elaborately on the sides of the vessel.

“I believe both of us would fit in that,” remarked Little Knight, as they stopped for him to look at it. “Isn’t this room a wonder, and so lovely, too—it’s quite different from what I expected to find among the Gnomes!”

"I never took much interest in it before," remarked Letty. "The whole place just meant a prison to me, and the bigger I found it was, the more discouraged I felt. But seeing that it belongs to us now, as you might say, makes it look different. I never knew glass could be made into furniture till I saw it here; there is no other kind; green in the library, with the oddest desks, tables, and book racks and cases—the queerest arrangements, but I dare say I'll find everything looks lovely to me tomorrow!"

"And you must see the reception room, Little Knight! It's—what shall I say? It is heavy crystal, cut, you know, and lighted up it's most too dazzling to look at! Then there's red in the drawing-room, blue in the sitting room, dark. The parlor is all opal, my room white, with pink trimmings—just the opposite to my bower—and rooms of pale green and pale blue, oh, all the colors, and more different shades of them than you can think of! You'll just have to see it. The violet is one of the sweetest—just at first—but when you are in it a few minutes it makes you feel so homesick! The whole castle is a regular maze and everything is arranged to get the best effects, though you don't realize that! But come on, or we'll never find out what a good cook you are!" and she laughed a happy, care-free laugh, such as had never been heard in that solemn room before from mortal lips. "We won't eat here, it's so big it would take away our appetites!"

At the end they now approached, heavy draperies closed in a cozy breakfast room, done in the same amber tones and with furniture on the same style, but not so massive as that in the main dining hall. A bright fire

burned in a shining copper grate, and all three felt their hearts lighten when they saw its glow.

"Isn't this cozy? Goromogore has been as kind to me as he could be, and yet keep me a prisoner. As soon as I said I didn't like that big salon, he had this fitted up; and I hope I'm not ungrateful, but oh, I am so glad when I think he'll never be here again!"

"I don't think anyone could be expected to feel grateful toward one who had carried her away, not only from all her friends and people, but all her own kind. Good as the little inhabitants of the woods were to me, I couldn't feel toward them as I now do if they made me a prisoner! Even to live in Fairyland against my will would make me dislike the fairies, I believe!" said Little Knight, staunchly defending the Little Princess against her own too tender conscience. Letty nodded approval so emphatically that she loosened one of her hairpins and had to give her attention to that, and before she was ready to give her opinion of Goromogore, Little Knight asked, as they seated themselves at the table:

"Now isn't there something you would particularly like, Letty?" Letty laughed.

"The Little Princess has wished for about everything we've been longing for, unless that which even you, my clever little cook, cannot make me here—a cup of tea such as I was used to at home in the palace!"

"I'll see what I can do," and there was a look of demure mischief on Little Knight's face as he pressed his ring.

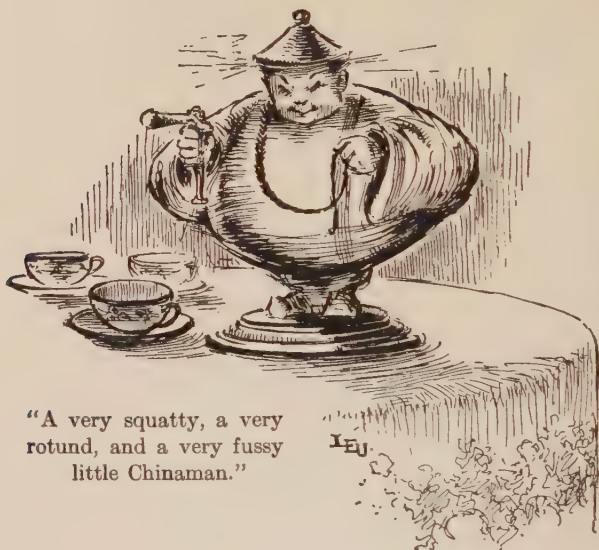
Then came a few moments' silence.

There was a twinkle in the Little Princess's eyes, and she was about to make some remark, when "whisk!" a

beautiful lace cloth spread the table—a couple of cherubs as natural as life, except that they were only seven or eight inches high, were standing in a tangle of feathery, fairy ferns in the center. Their chubby faces were full of childish glee, as, close together, they clung to the pearl handle of a small but rather deep-domed pink silk umbrella, from which concealed lights shed a softened glow around; with their other hands they were holding their scant draperies close to them, as though they were really out in a storm, and suddenly the three mortals started, for a white flake did fall, then another and another, right on and around the pink silk dome! Looking up, behold!—another cherub poised on gauzy wings just above the fairy umbrella. Such a look of mischief was on his chubby face, as from a horn of plenty, held under his left arm, and which was filled with the white flakes, which proved to be rose petals, he showered his fragrant snow-storm down!

So delighted were the fairies' guests they could not take their eyes from the charming spectacle for quite a while; when they did, behold—another smaller cherub, standing before each plate, holding toward the diner with both hands, a diminutive horn of plenty, from each of which hung a spray of small white roses! And in addition to this, beside Letty's plate was a little urn that looked like a very squatty, a very rotund, and a very fussy little Chinaman, for it was hissing and steaming away at a great rate, filling the air with a, to her, very familiar, very delicious, and very-much-longed-for fragrance—that of her favorite home brew!

This put the finishing touch to what was one of the most enjoyed and enjoyable dinners ever imagined, for



"A very squatty, a very rotund, and a very fussy little Chinaman."

the Little Princess was even more pleased about Letty's Chinaman with his urn of Letty's tea, than was Letty herself, if that were possible! And Little Knight was delighted in the pleasure he had had the means to provide them.

As the dinner progressed the storm became fast and furious; snowflakes fell so thick the little figures under the umbrella were almost lost sight of, and at one time whole roses, of the fairy variety, exquisitely small, battered the pink silk dome, and fairy music, sweet and soft, yet gay and cheerful, filled the room. To its accompaniment Little Knight told the story of the wonderful napkin ring, and passed it round to be admired; as soon as he took it from his finger it assumed its right size and appearance, but turned into the exquisitely dainty finger

ring again when he put it back on his hand. He did not forget to send his message to his little friends; when they were ready to go, he hung the steel chain on the cornucopia in which the little cherub had brought his offering of roses—a message of rejoicement, he knew, to Fairyland.

Late they talked that night. Little Knight learned that most of those who had set out on the fatal Quest during his father's time, and quite a number belonging to his grandfather's generation, were still alive. They had all been caught in the toils of the Gnomes the very day upon which they had entered the forest, and were compelled to work and slave for the troops of idle little fellows. They lived on the poorest—though substantial—fare, and were “housed” in the forest, for they were transformed into animals as soon as their day's work was done.

The Little Princess only had been an exception to this rule; she “worked not, neither did she spin”; a number of Gnome maids of her own selection waited upon her hand and foot all day, made her the most beautiful clothes, played with, or for her, and amused her; and Letty, on account of the Little Princess, was herself during the night, which she spent with her little mistress, and even under her changed form could talk to her, though to no one else! Little Knight's heart grew sad within him as he listened. How he longed to fly to the rescue of those poor unfortunate men! Only by getting possession of the Magic Jewel of the Forest could he hope to help them. He must start on his investigations the first thing in the morning.

That night he occupied a room which opened into

that of the Little Princess. She and Letty slept in "twin beds"; they all felt better in being as near together as possible, for even though the castle was freed from the Gnomes' power, they knew they were surrounded by the wicked little beings, who would now be infuriated to distraction. However, they slept soundly and well.

CHAPTER XXII

LITTLE KNIGHT FARES FORTH FROM THE CASTLE

THEY breakfasted in another little room of the same suite, the Little Princess hardly being able to eat a bite she was so delighted with the fairy service. All the dishes, from the porridge sets to the coffee cups, were in the shape of water lilies, large and small, full blown, and just opening, the stems artistically twined for handles, and the broad, green leaves being used for plates, saucers, and even trays.

Then for the grand tour of their "Kingdom" as the Little Princess called Castle Grim; but search as they might they could not find any way of entrance or exit except by the great doors at the head of the Dragon's Stair, which the Gnomes now constantly guarded. One of the windows in the kitchen was raised five inches or so, but with their united strength they were unable to budge it either up or down. Little Knight felt sure there must be some secret passages in the castle, and they tapped walls and pushed panels, rapped mantels, and rolled cabinets and other of the larger pieces of furniture around—all in vain. Roof and cellar and all between they examined, only to meet with disappointment. It took them the entire morning. At last, wearied and discouraged, they returned to the Princess's bower to rest and talk matters over.

"The only thing I can do is to get out unobserved and search for an entrance to their stronghold; I believe Goromogore must carry the Jewel himself. If I could surprise him alone, this whiff would settle the business," and he drew forth the beautiful little diamond bottle. "If it only contained more than one whiff, I might settle each one as I came to him! But I won't waste it; I'll keep it till I'm in direst need. Let's go take a peep at the stairway again."

They found it as it had been ever since Hornyback was conquered, with a whole string of Gnomes sitting on the top step, as near to the door as they could get; it appeared useless to try to pass them; and once outside, it seemed one chance in a thousand that he would be able to enter their stronghold without detection, knowing neither the way to it nor the manner in which it was guarded. Back they went to the bower. They were sitting, each meditating intently, when Letty said slowly:

"There's a witch lives a way off over in the left end of the mountain somewhere, who might help you if you could get to her. I heard them talking about her one day; they call her 'Mog of the Mountain'; they have no power over her and seem to be afraid of her, but she might do harm to you, too!"

"O Letty, you dear! Is that so?" cried Little Knight, delighted and all animation now, with something definite in view. "If she is against them, I know she will help me! I must start right away to find her—only—how shall I pass the magic line?" he ended, crestfallen.

Both Letty and the little girl, though they would enjoy having him tarry with them, sadly agreed that the sooner the Magic Jewel of the Forest was recovered the

better it would be for all, and like his mother, they had unbounded faith in him; so now they were as disappointed as he. Suddenly the Little Princess's eyes brightened.

"Couldn't you use the magic frog skin, Little Knight, and hop away from them?" asked she.

"Hooray!" Little Knight started up and thrust his hand into his bosom, exclaiming as he drew the withered bit of magic forth, "I wonder if the charm will work again; it was pretty well tattered, but King Bullfrog didn't limit it; you know the little bunch of feathers could only be used once! I've a notion to try!"

"Oh!" tears filled the big brown eyes of the Little Princess and the kind gray ones of the nurse, "but such a big frog! They will surely suspect something and head you off; you might get away from those here, but they would call and signal to the others, and Tricksy will set traps everywhere!"

"I'll have to risk that; if it only works, I'll be away from here in a jiffy, and if it only lasts long enough for me to get into the forest I think I can manage; they were after me before you know, but thanks to the kindness of my little friends, I escaped them, and they will have to catch me before they can do anything worse than they have already done. I shall feel better this time, too, for I'll know you are safe from their spells in the castle; I shall leave the napkin ring with you."

At this they both protested, but Little Knight made them see that he had a much better chance of getting enough to eat than had they, shut in the castle walls; there were the nuts and wild fruits on which he had lived before he met the little Swan fairies and received their gift, and supposing, just supposing, he did get caught,

they would be safe not to starve, anyway; they could live for years and years in the castle, and perhaps the fairies, by means of the gift, might be able to aid them some other way some time—who knows—perhaps it might be through that, that they would be able to free him again! And the Gnomes would never get possession of it while it was in the castle, that was another thing! And so they were reassured.

“But maybe I cannot work it,” said the Little Princess. “I shall begin by wishing for a supply of sandwiches for you to take with you!”

Little Knight took the ring from his finger and slipped it upon that of the Little Princess, and lo! it fitted as if made for her! She wished, pressed the ring, and in a very few moments a dainty case like a small knapsack appeared and proved to be full of choice sandwiches, each wrapped in its own filmy napkin! She clapped her hands with delight, then buckled the knapsack in place, just as the ladies in the storybooks pinned their tokens to their chosen heroes, who had never, any of them, faced more terrible dangers than her Little Knight Brave, she declared.

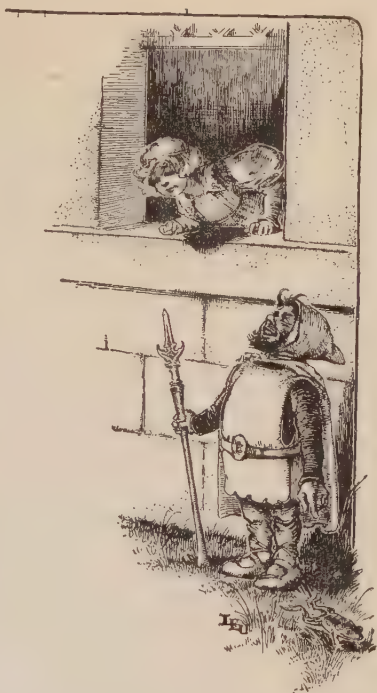
They repaired to the entrance hall where they parted in the shadow of the palms; then Little Knight stepped forth and softly approached the line of Gnomes. When at the end of the palm aisle, he clapped the frog skin between his shoulders; his hand trembled, he was so afraid it wouldn't work, but it did, though in a way which greatly surprised him and the two watchers, for instead of the skin growing to fit him, he grew to fit the skin, and became in an instant a common, natural-sized, green speckled frog! This made matters much easier for him. He hopped back joyfully to Letty and the Little Princess.

"Isn't this great!" he exclaimed. "I shall get out by the kitchen window and their suspicions will not even be raised!"

Joyfully they trooped down the two great flights of stairs to the ground floor and entered the big kitchen. They spoke in low tones as they neared the window — Gnomes have sharp ears.

With a light-hearted jump Little Knight was on the sink board; another, he was at the open window. Quite easy it was for him to get through it now! But stay, just below the sill he caught sight of the russet peak of a Gnome's hood; there was evidently a guard at every window!

Softly he crept back and hopped out to the hall, where Letty and the Little Princess followed him, wondering. He told them of his discovery and they agreed upon a plan to outwit the guard. And so when he again reached the sill the Little Princess screamed, while Letty, too, cried out, and made as though she had given the frog a fling when Little Knight, with a great jump, leaped to the ground.



"Go back, little girl, it won't eat you."

The startled little Gnome turned quickly to see the two big-eyed and scared-looking mortals glaring out the window above him.

"What's the matter?" he asked, for he knew them well.

"Oh!—oh!—the nasty thing!" said Letty with a shudder.

"It looked like a—a frog!" said the Little Princess.

"It was a frog, if you mean that you just threw out of the window," and his broad, rather good-humored face was almost divided into an upper and a lower half by the grin which spread from ear to ear. "Go back, little girl, it won't eat you; if it comes near here again I'll kill it!"

"Oh no, please, Hollowpate," the Little Princess clasped her hands imploringly, for what if Little Knight should return in the same guise!

"I don't think I'll get a chance," said the Gnome cheerily, "so you needn't bother; it's scared worse than you are; I didn't think you could shriek so, Spotty!" and he laughed and leered at Letty; they all had strict orders from their King to treat the Little Princess with utmost respect. The nurse turned up her nose at him and said:

"Come away, little mistress, I wouldn't lower myself to talk to the likes of such a creature!"

"But Hollowpate is a good friend of mine, Letty," and the Little Princess, who was wise for her years, looked meaningly at her. "You won't touch any of the poor frogs, will you, Patey?" asked she in her sweet, coaxing way.

"Not Patey!" said the little Gnome, who, if his pate was hollow, had too kind a heart to belong to the wicked

tribe he did, and who was much gratified at the little mortal's confidence in him.

"You are good, Hollowpate, and if I ever get back home and you need a friend you will know where to find one. I haven't forgotten about your not prodding like the others do!"

"If you ever do get back to the Kingdom, I will need a friend, for I don't want to leave this," he made a sweeping gesture with his short arm, "for the scrubby pile of rocks we came from, but I would rather have you here with us!"

"Ah, Patey, you would be much happier with the mortals than they could ever be with you!" And the Little Princess entered upon a long argument with Hollowpate, for she wished to divert his thoughts so far from the frog that he would scarcely think of it again; and all the while she knew that Little Knight was hopping off to seek help from the witch, Mog of the Mountain.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE WITCH'S HUT

A FEW hours found Little Knight far on his journey. He was tired from hopping along in the heat of the day, and paused at the edge of a little stream beneath a great oak to rest. The magic frog skin, too, was giving out, and he decided to take it off and walk the remainder of the way or it would be in such shreds no one would be able to recognize what it had been and he wished to keep it as a memento, but he sat with it on while he rested. He was only there a few minutes when suddenly the most delicious breeze sprang up; it floated down the stream and seemed to be laden with all the fragrance of early spring. He turned to catch the full softness of it in his face, and to drink in its odorous freshness, when in a twinkling it turned into a regular whirlwind—not cold like a winter blast, it is true—it remained soft and warm, but so strong he could scarcely keep his feet; hastily he pulled off his frog skin, for fear it would be blown from him in rags, and sought shelter on the other side of the tree trunk. From the comparative quietude there, he had leisure to observe that only the trees right around the spot where he stood seemed to be blown so furiously; farther down the stream the leaves on the oaks and maples scarcely quivered. Was it magic? Always on the alert, he brought forth his trusty

danger signal; it remained calmly waiting him to follow, no matter in what direction he threw it. By the time he had tried it at all points the gale had somewhat subsided and feeling rested, he thought he would start on again.



"A chubby, rosy-cheeked cherub with a look of vexation on his face."

Adjusting his belt and knapsack he stepped forth, and again the whirlwind struck him with full force. He put up both hands to pull his hat more firmly on his head and thought he caught a glimpse of something which wasn't leaves in a neighboring tree. Looking again, he was amazed to see a chubby, rosy-cheeked cherub with a look

of vexation on his face, trying vainly to free his floating draperies from the boughs among which they had become tangled.

"Let me help you," he cried impulsively, running forward. The cherub stopped his tussle and looked in amazement down at his new friend; when he became quiet the whirlwind subsided.

"Oh, will you!" said he, "I'm afraid you will have quite a task;" but Little Knight had already set to work. "I am one of the Spirits of the Wind. I was only born this spring, so I'm rather a novice yet, just a May breeze; my mother, the Southwind, warned me to keep along the streams at first, but I saw a brother of mine who was only born the early part of April having such a good time playing tag with the tree tops and it looked so easy, I thought I'd try it, and"—ruefully—"you see what sport it was! I was becoming exhausted, and if you hadn't happened along, Little Knight—oh, you've got it out, haven't you!"—the little Spirit shook his white draperies softly with delight, and a scent of violets floated all around them—"I would have had to stay here dear knows how long!"

"I'm very glad I did happen here at the right moment; you are too good to be kept in one spot!"

"Did you like the air I was blowing?"

"Like it? You have no idea how refreshing it was—why, I was drinking it in!"

"And I thought I wasn't doing a bit of good! But mothers always know best, don't they? Here's how I do it; you are the very first mortal who has been able to see me, though I know they feel me from the remarks they make."

Little Knight saw he had a sheaf of lily stalks in his

sash; he broke off a beautiful white bloom, and blowing into the stem, a soft, delicious, fragrant air stole forth from its snowy well! Shutting his eyes, it made him dream of blooming orchards, of lilac plumes nodding over old garden walls, violets down by shady brooksides. "I could stay here all day with you," he said regretfully, "but I ought to be on my way now!"

"So could I—I, too, have delayed too long. Let me blow you another air," and in response to the puffing of the chubby cheeks, an invigorating breeze that spoke of showers splashing in the river and ducks and turkeys and chickens scrambling for shelter came rioting forth. It woke Little Knight, too!

"Thank you—that was a bracer—I feel ready to go on now," said he.

"What direction are you going?" asked the friendly little Spirit.

"Straight to the left. I am seeking Mog of the Mountain; do you know anything of her?"

"And I am going just the opposite way!" disappointedly, "but I am glad you mentioned whom you are looking for. I passed her hut about half an hour ago, and it's rather hard to find unless you know the exact way; you are on the right road so far; keep straight ahead; by dusk you will come to a well-sheltered glade, where the trees are very close and high; go through it and on the other side you will come to where the mountain begins to slope almost straight up; you will find a path concealed by two hawthorn bushes; crawl under them; follow the path, which winds around the mountain, and you will soon discover Mog's retreat. I know all about your Quest, Little Knight! From hoary old Grandfather Northwind,

down to the breezelets born to-day, all the Spirits of the Wind are wishing you success. And now take this." He broke a lily bud from the stalk and gave it to him. "When you are in need of assistance blow it as you saw me blow!" Little Knight again thanked him and they parted, chubby little Maybreeze leaving a grateful coolness in his wake.

His fortunate meeting with the little Spirit sent Little Knight on his way rejoicing. He now had only to follow directions and need lose no time going into bypaths to look for the witch's hut.

Dusk found him at the glade sheltered by the tall, close-growing trees. It was an eerie place to enter and he had no assurance, save her enmity to the Gnomes, that Mog of the Mountain would favor him, but not waiting to weaken his courage by imagining the terrors which might await him in the lonely dell, he strode as fast as he could through the deep shadows in search of the hawthorn gateway. The hawthorns were in full bloom, so he found them without trouble and squirmed through to the other side. Sure enough the mountain did slope "straight up," but the path wound gently around it, and suddenly—and so near was he that he stepped backward in amazement—the witch's hut loomed black in the gathering darkness, across his way! The path, with an abrupt turn, had ended in a broad shoulder or shelving of the mountain.

Before he had recovered from his surprise there was a movement in the hut and a number of black cats with yellow eyes flashed out of the low open door, followed by a little, bent old witch body, leaning heavily with both hands on a stout, curiously carved cane. The cats clus-

tered around her, with arched backs and bushy tails, ready at a word to spring upon him, Little Knight knew.

"Who comes?" said a voice tantalizingly familiar; his heart beat faster—was it Sharpwit? Was the story of "Mog of the Mountain" but a bait which the Gnomes had purposely dropped in Letty's hearing? Well, he was in for it now, friend or foe!

"One who seeks a friend," answered he boldly. At the sound of his voice the little old woman raised her head and seemed trying to pierce the gloom.

"Nearer," said she, but Little Knight stood firm at the end of the path—he would run no further risk of putting himself in the Gnomes' clutches; if this were one of their traps he was nearer to it now than he cared to be. The old witch waited a moment then came nearer to him.

"Who seeks a friend in Mog of the Mountain?" she queried, and then Little Knight caught sight of her face—wrinkled and brown, like old parchment it was, with nose and chin "in close companionship," only the eyes were blue with the brightness of youth; and instead of answering her question, he stretched out both hands eagerly to her and cried:

"My little Witch of the Jonquils!" The little body straightened like an arrow; age dropped from her in a twinkling.

"Little Knight!" she gasped delightedly, "Little Knight Brave!" She caught both his hands and held them close, then dropped one that she might pat him on the shoulder, "My dear, dear boy, you have then conquered the Dragon and released the Castle from Goromogore's power—Little Knight Brave, come in, come in!"

Contrary to what he was led to expect from the out-

side appearance of the hut, the interior was a place of beauty and luxury. Jonquils bloomed in low, wide-mouthed jars; heavy green silken draperies covered the walls. The place was aglow with pale candlelight; a bright fire burned steadily in the wide fireplace; the cats, which had looked so fiercely at him when they burst from the door, were grouped in homelike attitudes about, some purring and rubbing up against him and their fairy mistress, some lounging lazily on the hearth blinking into the fire, others daintily washing their faces with velvet paws, their black coats contrasting well with their surroundings.

An interested listener had Little Knight then! But when he had finished his story, the little witch sadly shook her head.

"I can tell you so little, Little Knight—but if you could reach the White Owl."

"The White Owl!" Little Knight ejaculated. "The one the Gnomes talk about—the one who was in old Owl-eyes' Castle?" for he remembered Squatty's and Cheerful's talk. Mother Heart-of-Gold nodded.

"The same," said she.

"And to think I was so near her!" Little Knight felt keenly disappointed, even at this late day.

"Do not regret that, dear boy," said the little fairy consolingly; "if it had not been for the best, the White Owl would not have allowed you to leave her, you may depend upon it. If you could reach her now she would aid you if possible, though she cannot speak anything but the bird language."

"Ah, but if I find her that will be no hindrance, dear little Witch of the Jonquils; I have had the 'D. B. L.' degree—Doctor of Bird Languages—conferred upon me!

Allow me to introduce to you a pupil of the renowned Professor Redbreast!" and Little Knight rose, making her a sweeping bow.

"Well, well!" exclaimed the delighted little fairy. "But yet, Little Knight, you will have, I am afraid, an impossible task to reach her. She is now a prisoner in the Bats' Eyrie, on the Pinnacle, which is the highest point of the mountains; it is in a direct line from the back of my hut!"

"How far from here?"

"From dawn to dusk—the way is so hazardous, so dangerous for mortal feet—to the foot of the crag; from there, I fear, forever!"

"Well, I shall go to the foot of the crag, at any rate," said Little Knight cheerfully, "and as much farther as I can, and perhaps if I cannot reach her, the White Owl may be able in some way to communicate with me." Mother Heart-of-Gold shook her head, but she was cheered in spite of herself.

"Ah, dear Little Knight," said she, "you cannot imagine what happiness you will give to untold numbers in all parts of the realms if you should succeed on the Quest. As it is, you will never be forgotten in Fairyland, nor among any of the little inhabitants of the forest. But now let us make a cup of tea, then to bed, if you are to begin your journey at dawn."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE PRISONER OF THE PINNACLE

DAWN it was when Little Knight started the toilsome climb. Craggy Heights was an easy road compared to it, for the way was honeycombed with pitfalls. Sometimes he had to retrace his steps for a hundred yards to avoid a chasm that yawned across his path, and at all times he had to pick his every step, for loose stones lay concealed beneath the leaves and moss—a treacherous road indeed!

As the little fairy had said, just at dusk the Pinnacle came to view. His first glance sent his heart clear down to his shoes; he stood and gazed a few moments in dismay. Almost smooth and perfectly bare, the Pinnacle, a great cone of granite, reared itself hundreds of feet into the air above him. Mother Heart-of-Gold was right; it did seem impossible to reach the White Owl, imprisoned on the top of that sheer wall. If she knew their secret, the Gnomes had chosen their Eyrie well!

Slap! The little monitor clung to his hand. Mechanically Little Knight dropped into a crevice between two huge boulders; for the moment, he was so nearly worn out after the long day's toilsome climb, he was utterly discouraged. His brave little heart was like a lump of lead in his bosom. He suddenly realized how far, how very far away he was from home; how completely alone in the

desert mountain; what a dangerous road he would have to travel even to reach the castle where the Little Princess was. And how forlorn and discouraged he would undertake the return journey, with only shattered hopes to bear him company!

As he lay there, he concluded it was his nearness to the Bats' Eyrie of which the little monitor had warned him. He was about to rise to take another survey of the crag, when he caught sight of something moving about a hundred feet from his place of concealment, and looking intently, he saw that it was a donkey—a little long-eared donkey! His hopes were not quite shattered yet! His heart leaped—if he could catch it! His little quill stuck like glue to his hand, but that was to be expected. His whole attention was given to the donkey; he wondered how best he might approach it, for it looked like a wild little thing. Possibly it had belonged to some poor unfortunate mortal out on the Quest, and the Gnomes had allowed it to roam where it willed; suddenly it pricked up its ears, kicked out its hind legs, then gallop it went full tilt toward the Pinnacle.

On a path so narrow it made Little Knight hold his breath to see it tread, the sure-footed little beast climbed slowly but steadfastly, round and round, disappearing and appearing each time nearer the Eyrie, till it was within fifty feet of the summit; then it vanished once more on the other side. For a long time Little Knight watched in vain for its reappearance farther up; poor little beast, had it made a false step? His glance came back, and he almost jumped from his hiding place, for if there wasn't the little animal sedately picking its steps near the base of the crag on its way down! Now was his chance;

he would catch the sure-footed little fellow and risk going to the summit on his back.

But he found his calculations and the donkey's did not chime in together; round and round ran the frisky little fellow, jumping rocks and making unexpected turns and leaps, Little Knight chasing him until, after a quarter of an hour of such sport, he was too exhausted to run another step.

"I guess I'll have to let you have your own way to-night, Sure-foot, but we'll have another try to-morrow."

The donkey was standing provokingly close to him flapping his long ears at him, derisively, Little Knight thought, but he was too tired to be tempted to try again to capture him. He was turning with a yawn to find a place to conceal himself for the night, when the donkey reared itself on its hind legs, the front ones suddenly became arms, and he was face to face with the arch trickster of Gnomeland, none other than Tricksy the scout! He knew him even before he spoke, from the description the Little Princess and Letty had given him, and on the instant his hand sought his bosom.

"Yes, I guess you will have to let me have my 'own way' to-night, and to-morrow, too, my gallant young Knight Brave!" cried he tauntingly. "You thought you were a fine fellow outwitting the Gnomes, but we have only been playing with you; you are such a youngster, we thought we would let you enjoy yourself for a while, but after to-night in with the rest you go!"

"Don't be too sure of that," cried Little Knight in turn, and with a twist of the fingers Prince Joli's gift was unstoppered, and with a quick movement the hand holding the diamond bottle shot out and landed directly under the

little Gnome's nose. He was taken completely unawares, and drawing a quick breath made a lunge toward his adversary, but the "whiff" had gotten in its work; he fell prone at Little Knight's feet and lay there, inert.

Little Knight was trembling with nervousness now that the danger was passed; he had had a hard, discouraging day, but the springing of this unexpected trap by the astute Tricksy and his victory over him gave him new life. Tricksy, the renowned Tricksy, helpless at his feet, bound in the chains of sleep till this time to-morrow—it must be about half past seven o'clock; in the extravagance of his joy he hugged and kissed the little bottle, then with all his strength he tugged, and pulled, and pushed the little Gnome into the crevice between the rocks where he had been hidden when he watched the "donkey." The others would not think of hunting for him, so he felt sure he would not be discovered; even if found, he could give them no information; they would think he was out working some of his schemes, if they did miss him. He had intended that "whiff" for Goromogore, but he had had no choice and did not regret the use he had made of it. "How glad Joli will be when he hears from what a fate his gift rescued me! Well, I guess while I'm sure of Tricksy's whereabouts for the next twenty-four hours I'll see what I can prepare as a surprise for him when he awakens; I'll bankrupt myself by using my last call for assistance; perhaps Maybreeze will be able to tell me how I may communicate with the White Owl!" soliloquized he. He put the stem of the lily bud to his mouth and blew upon it, softly at first, but as no sound issued therefrom he blew harder and harder, until, indeed, his poor little cheeks plumped out like balloons, and he was becoming

quite purple with the exertion when a soft cool breeze laved his brow and in another second, while still he blew, Maybreeze alighted on the ground before him; he was laughing heartily and said, as he put his hand to his ears:

"There, there, my lusty friend, don't burst a blood vessel; I was at the other side of the Southland, and started as soon as I heard your first blast, and you've kept up a continual toot ever since!" Little Knight, panting from his work, stared at him, then gasped between breaths:

"Did it blow? I thought I had broken it some way!"

"Did you expect to hear it yourself? Oh! ha! Oh! ha! ha!" and Cherub Maybreeze laughed till Little Knight, who had sunk to the ground tired out, was refreshed and cooled by the wind the little spirit's laughter awoke, and he, too, joined in the merriment, though softly, for he was afraid the Gnomes might be near.

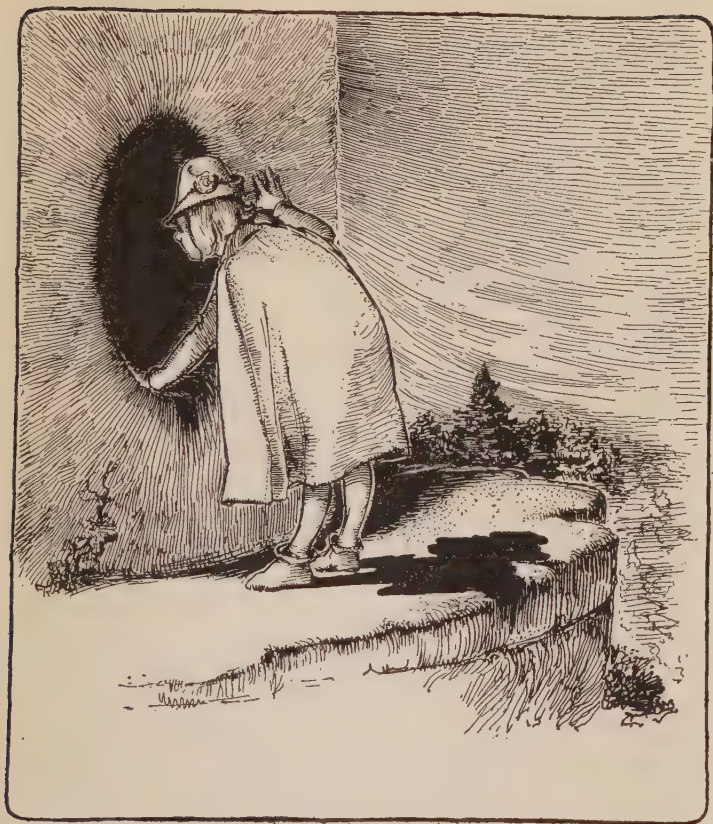
"Now, Little Knight, what can I do for you?" asked he when at last they sobered down. Little Knight explained his predicament.

"And as you directed me so carefully and so accurately to Mother Heart-of-Gold's retreat, I thought perhaps you might be able to help me reach the Bats' Eyrie, where the White Owl is imprisoned, or to communicate with her some way!" he wound up.

"Help you reach her?—why, boy," said little Maybreeze heartily, "I'll take you right to her—set you down at her prison door!"

"No!" said Little Knight in blank astonishment and delight. "Can you, Maybreeze?"

"I can and I will! Moreover, I'll wait till you've had your interview and bring you back again—else I'm afraid my first help would be anything but a kindness!"



"A round hole which looked pitch dark in the moonlight."

Climb right up and hold tight, but don't choke me—there—that's it; in two shakes of a dead lamb's tail we'll be there!"

And they were—in much less time than that! As they skimmed through the air Little Knight glanced down, but only once—for the distance was so terrifying, he felt so

small as he was lifted, literally on the wings of the wind, high above the earth that the one glance made him sick and dizzy; his hold tightened round the little Breeze's neck; he shut his eyes, then felt himself gently placed on solid ground.

"Steady," the cherub softly whispered, waited a moment till he gathered his wits, then pointing to the lily bud, which he still held in his hand, and to the other side of the Pinnacle, flew swiftly away!

Little Knight found himself on a flat rock, directly in front of a round hole which looked pitch dark in the moonlight, for the moon shone bright and full. Not wasting a moment, he thrust his head in at the opening; when his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he saw a glimmer of white far back on one side of the aperture. The silence was intense; Little Knight scarcely dared breathe; there was a faint movement like the stealthy rustle of dragging wings, then silence again; this was repeated several times, the white glimmer growing larger, till finally he could distinguish the shape of a great white owl. Then he cautiously withdrew his head; he had not long to wait before the snowy bird was framed in the doorway—a beautiful picture she made against the inky blackness, white as new-fallen snow, eyes of deep amber with shades of wine brown—he noticed her wings were bound as they had been in the Giant's castle. She did not fear him in the least; with one foot she pointed to the cords which bound her, then shook her head violently from side to side, looking back toward the cave; he took it as a caution not to speak, but in a twinkling drew his dagger, and once more since he had entered the forest the White Owl owed her liberty to Little Knight Brave.

Pointing to the earth, she nodded assent and he put the lily bud to his lips.

Light as thistledown the little Spirit of the Wind floated over the Pinnacle; Little Knight took the White Owl in his arms; in a few seconds they were among the rocks near where Tricksy was taking his quiet but enforced sleep, with the Bats' Eyrie far above them on the Pinnacle of the forbidding crag.

"Where now?" inquired Maybreeze. "I am at your service to your journey's end." They both thanked him, and the White Owl said:

"I would like to fly over Mog of the Mountain's cabin; it is a little out of the way, but I would like to leave a message for her."

"May I ask where we are going?" inquired Little Knight. The White Owl turned to him with a smile in her eyes; unlike Mother Heart-of-Gold, she was not the least surprised to find he could understand the bird language.

"To Castle Grim, which, thanks to you, dear Little Knight, is a refuge from tortures so long borne, and so cruel, you cannot conceive their immensity, nor the immeasurable relief it will be to be free from them; I know what you would find out from me, and will do my best to assist you when we are in safety; but every moment we linger is a menace to our freedom; perfect silence till we reach our haven is our surest plan!"

All this was whispered in the lowest tones as they halted in the shadows. At her last words Maybreeze softly rose from the earth; in almost a breath's space the weird abode of Mog of the Mountain came to view; silently the White Owl plucked a feather from her breast; they watched it

float down like a flake of snow, and before they were out of sight a light flashed from the door of the hut; the little witch came forth, picked up the feather, which, light as it was, she must have heard fall, then eagerly straightened, and hand to eyes, peered upward all around; just as they were vanishing she must have seen them, for she waved her hand; the White Owl with a deep breath, which told at what a tension she had been during the acting of this scene, settled comfortably in Little Knight's arm, while the cherub kept in the open over the stream which was well out of the woods and in the clearing opposite the Marble Castle before it made a turn.

Alighting on the roof according to the White Owl's request, the little Spirit of the Wind, in response to their warm thanks, after telling them how glad he was to have been able to serve them, kissed them softly, and with a flutter of wings that filled the air with the fragrance of violets was up and away toward his Southland again.

Little Knight and his strange companion went at once to a window in one of the turrets, which loomed a story above the flat roof at each corner of the Castle; he had no trouble in opening it as the sash swung outward; it was easy to climb over the sill, and once inside they clapped their hands in glee—at least Little Knight did, while the White Owl flapped her wings.

“Joy! Joy!” cried she. “Come, haste, Little Knight, to the Little Princess—I can scarcely wait!” Obediently Little Knight flew to the door and went as fast as he could in the semi-darkness, for the moonbeams which crept in the little windows were all that lighted the narrow winding stair, down the first flight of steps; there they left the turret for the main part of the castle and he had

no difficulty finding the way through the broad galleries and down the wide staircase to the floor where the Little Princess's living rooms were. It was not more than half past eight—Maybreeze was a swift traveler; very likely the little girl would be awake and Little Knight rapped softly on the door to the bower, a double knock they had agreed upon. There was no response; half fearfully they looked at each other, but the White Owl recovered in a moment.

“It is all right, Little Knight, you have set the Castle free from the Gnomes' magic; they cannot harm its inmates. Rap again.” Little Knight wondered as he had on the mountains when she told the little Spirit of the Wind their destination, how she had learned so much about them, then he reflected that Mother Heart-of-Gold had told him the White Owl could probably help him gain possession of the Magic Jewel; besides, owls are proverbially wise, and this one seemed to know everything; he rapped twice as she bade him; still no response. Had Letty foolishly gone out and been captured and the Little Princess, left alone, been so frightened—ah, but she was too brave a little girl to give up that way, and surely too wise to try to follow Letty and put herself into Goromogore's power again. Perhaps after all they were sleeping; but hark! the murmur of voices from the hall below, a glimpse of light on the wall of the staircase! But neither he nor his companion stirred; they were afraid they might startle the Little Princess and the nurse by appearing suddenly before them. They waited till they had ascended the stairs; when they turned into the gallery Little Knight with a smile as he thought of their surprise, beat his tattoo on the door once more; both stopped:

Rap-a-rap-rap
Tap-a-tap-tap!

"Oh, he's here now!" was the Little Princess's delighted exclamation which left her auditors in no doubt as to who had been the subject of their conversation, and both she and Letty rushed toward him; they stopped in amazement when they saw the burden he carried.

"Little Knight! A white owl! What a beauty—where did you get it? Is it hurt?"

"Come into the apple-blossom bower and I'll tell you all about it," answered the White Owl in a voice that sounded like liquid golden bells and astonished Little Knight as much as it did the others. Letty hurried in first, to draw the thick silken draperies closely at the windows to keep the Gnomes from prying, lit the curious swinging lamps, and soon all were in the lovely nook.

"Now, dear Little Knight, put me down," the voice of music said, and Little Knight obeyed.

CHAPTER XXV

SURPRISES AT THE MARBLE CASTLE

NO sooner had the White Owl touched the floor than they were dazzled by a vision so fair, so beautiful, that no mortal could gaze full upon it till his eyes were strengthened by fairy charm. They saw a little fairy as radiant as the day, as delicate as moonbeams, poised on an apple bough, amid the blossoms. Her long golden hair floated down like a shining veil over a robe of shimmering whiteness, showered with diamonds which glistened like pearls of dew.

“The Fairy Queen!” exclaimed the Little Princess and Little Knight in one breath, while Letty could only gasp in her astonishment.

“You have spoken rightly, my dear little friends; you behold in me the unfortunate Queen of the Fairies, in the Gnome King’s power and under his magic spell for nearly five hundred years; doomed to remain in the form of a White Owl until the wicked little creature should choose to release me, but for the bravery and the courage of our dear Little Knight here,” said she, turning to the Little Princess and Letty.

“Five hundred years!” cried Letty aghast; “why, ma’am, you don’t look anything like your age—not more than twenty I’d take you to be, if you’ll pardon me for saying the same. But maybe the time you were in that

villain's power seems as long to you as it does to me; we've been in the forest but two years, and it truly seems like two centuries!" The little fairy smiled.

"Yes, it does seem a long, long time to me, more than the five hundred years it really was, but with the aid of my dear little Maids of Dew I have been able to keep track of everything that was going on both in Fairyland and the Kingdom."

The Maids of Dew! All became clear to Little Knight; he had wondered what that line, "in owl's eyes the knowledge lies," in the little witch's incantation meant—the White Owl, the Little Fairy Queen, was mistress of both the little witch and her Maids of Dew!

"Goromogore did not change me into the White Owl till I learned the secret of the Magic Jewel of the Forest; since then, not only was I compelled to wear that form, but I was kept bound, a close prisoner, guarded by numbers of Gnomes under the form of bats in the Castle of Giant Owleyes. I think the old Giant's name suggested to Goromogore the form I should take, or, perhaps, I knew so much," and she smiled again, "he determined my outward form should be the badge of wisdom and the old Giant's Castle was as good a prison as he could wish, with plenty of room for the guards to exercise; while Owleyes was quite agreeable; he thought, rightly, it would give him prestige among his kind; the bats or Gnomes gave him an occasional piece of information and taught him some simple tricks of magic which made a great impression on the giants in other places—they are not a very intelligent race; soon he was called 'Owleyes the Wise' and I had the honor of having his Castle named for me, for they thought I was the source of his great knowledge; that I

was a bird of magic, a Seeress among the Seeresses of Owldom," and again the little Queen laughed, but rather sadly.

"But why, dear little Queen, did you not tell me who you were that day in White Owl Castle? I would have grabbed you up and carried you off with me!"

"Because of the Gnomes, or bats, as you thought them—while they were powerless to change back to their own forms, they could have set upon you as they were, in such numbers that you would have been hindered from following Owleyes long enough to enable him to rise from his chair, or they might have destroyed your precious bunch of feathers—and then all would have been over, for you would hardly have escaped him a second time!"

"No, for even leaving his own nose out of the question, the bats would have betrayed any hiding place I might have found! I wonder why they didn't set upon me as it was."

"The majority of Gnomes are like the majority of mortals in that, Little Knight. It is only after everything is over they see what might have been done. If Sharpwit or Tricksy or any one of several others I know had been there to direct them, the chances are we would not be here now. Your escape from Owleyes was such a surprise to the Gnomes they were dumfounded; but I was afraid they might regain their senses before you had gotten away and fell as I did to attract and keep their attention; I had not the least idea I would escape from them; but my ruse succeeded; they each and all remembered, when they saw me on the floor and you cutting my bonds, that they were accountable to their King for the safety of their prisoner; all else was as nothing to them!" There was a

sigh of relief from the group, and they drew nearer together. The Little Princess broke the silence by exclaiming:

"Isn't it funny we like some people because they are so foolish and others because they are so wise! Now I like Hollowpate because he is—well, he is not a bit bright, and I love Little Knight because he is true and brave and knows just *ezzackly* what to do always," at which they laughed.

"It depends upon whose side the bright or foolish one happens to be, I presume," said the little Queen as she pinched her cheek, then continued her story. "However, when our valiant young Knight here did away with Owl-eyes, Goromogore was afraid he might return and release me and learn the secret. At once he had me removed to the Bats' Eyrie on the Pinnacle, inaccessible, so he thought, to the most dauntless mortal.

"When I first learned of Little Knight's desire to go upon the Quest, my heart beat for joy; I knew him through messages brought me by my little Maids of Dew, and felt he would succeed if anyone could; he possessed the armor hardest for the wicked to pierce. Unselfish, thoughtful, kind and gentle he had ever been; no wonder hope kindled in my bosom." At this the Little Princess, who loved to hear her Little Knight praised, suddenly leaned over to the branch upon which the little Queen was poised and gave her a very warm and very human kiss. The Queen, much pleased, patted her on the cheek, "and you, too, Little Princess, were the subject of many a verse of praise," whereon little Knight recovered from his embarrassment, while the little girl exclaimed in genuine amaze:

“Praise—I?” and all three of her friends began to extol her goodness, her unselfishness, so enthusiastically that she was soon as rosy as Little Knight had been; she hid her face in a spray of pink-and-white blossoms and asked:

“Please, your Majesty, didn’t the little Maids of Dew tell you about Letty too?” whereupon Letty grabbed her up and hugged her with a “Bless her dear little heart” and did not pay much attention to what the little Queen said in praise of her. By and by they got back to the story:

“When I heard I was to be a prisoner on the Pinnacle, my hopes died! Like Goromogore, I knew it to be inaccessible to mortal. But how he accomplished the impossible,” wound up the little Queen, turning to him, “let Little Knight relate; his tale will be but an additional proof of his kindness to others I dare say.” To ward off a general hymn of praise, Little Knight began hastily to tell of his adventures from the time he left the castle the day before. He had just commenced a description of the weird hut in the mountains, and the hair-raising effect of the fierce-looking cats with their big eyes glaring, their backs bowed to acute arches, their tails bushed out to twice their size, when “bounce,” right into the middle of the group as though conjured up by his words, sprang a great cat, black as night! But his back was not arched, his fur was as smooth as velvet and he purred in such a delightfully friendly way that after their first start of dismay, they could not help but welcome him, Little Knight patting him gently, the Little Princess coaxing him with pretty names, while Letty asked him in hospitable tones where “he had come from”; the Fairy Queen’s face

lighted up at sight of him, but she spoke no word, only held her head as though listening.

Finally the patter, patter, of small cushioned feet, mingled with the slower human tread, was heard—it became more distinct; Letty started up as did the two children, and into the bower through the screen of apple blossoms came the most picturesque little body the Little Princess had ever seen outside a fairy book. With short, round, full skirt, jacket with flowing sleeves and quaint scarlet bodice, all fantastically trimmed; with high-peaked, snake-twined cap, and carrying the cutest, blackest, roundest little gypsy pot, and surrounded by cats and cats and then more cats—cats of such jetty black, inky pitch, tarri-ness, that they would make a blot on a dark night! Running and leaping around her, they seemed to be everywhere at once, but the little witch paid no attention to them; as soon as she came in sight of the little fairy on the apple bough, with a glad cry she rushed forward—they were locked in a long and rapturous embrace!

What rejoicing there was! For Letty and the Little Princess had already learned her history as told to Little Knight by Prince Joli, and were glad with them.

“But why do you not change back to a dear little fairy?” asked the Little Princess shyly when they had become rational again.

“Because, my dear, I was allowed to take on mortal form, the only way I could be anywhere near my beloved Queen, only on condition that I should so remain until the forest was freed from the wicked Gnomes’ enchantment by the recovery of the Magic Jewel by the Kingdom.”

“How did you get into the Castle, little Mother,” asked the Queen tenderly.

"Through the kitchen window; the same our good Little Knight hopped out of so courageously yesterday on his search for Mog of the Mountain," and the blue eyes twinkled and she patted Little Knight's hand. "I remembered what he told me and looked for it."

"But how did you know where to look for us so soon?" Fairasmorn inquired.

"I heard your message fall, as you know, and was just in time to catch a glimpse of something flying in this direction. I concluded at once that our dear boy had found some way of rescuing you, and knew of course, your destination would be the one safe spot in the forest—the Castle freed from the Gnomes' power—and now I am curious to learn how this wonderful escape was managed."

"And you are just in time to hear the story; Little Knight was on the point of describing his arrival at your cabin."

And so Little Knight told of his journey up the mountain, his encounter with Tricksy, the use he had made of Prince Joli's gift, and his call for aid on the lily-bud trumpet. How they clapped their hands when they heard of Tricksy's defeat!

"A donkey, sure!" said Letty with unction. "Many's the time I've felt like pulling the long ears of him; they heard the grass growing two inches underground I do believe!"

"By leaving you under the impression that he went there purposely to entrap you, he got credit for more acuteness than even he possesses," said the Queen. "He was there several hours consulting with some of the guards and believed you safe in the Castle for I heard him say as much. He was surprised when he saw you coming,

but of course it did not take him long to fix up his donkey scheme."

"Prince Joli will be in ecstasies when he hears about it," said Mother Heart-of-Gold with a laugh such as she had not enjoyed for centuries.

"One thing I would like to know, Mother Heart-of-Gold," said Little Knight, "and that is how you got in through that window; it was only raised a crack when I left yesterday—did you use your magic pot?"

"Ah, no, Little Knight, the Little Princess has been cajoling that wicked little Gnome Hollowpate—though I own he's not so bad as the rest—ever since you left till he raised the window for her; she thought you must return that way, and it would make it so much easier for you," Letty explained.

"By the way," chimed in the little witch, "Hollowpate is outside in the corridor now; I thought it best to bring him along with me—although he was very unwilling to come—for fear he might tell tales!"

"Good! But what shall we do when the guard is changed?" asked the Queen.

"Oh, I can take his place very easily, dear Fairasmorn; I shall don his clothes, and when I see Jugglekeg who relieves him, coming, I will walk away with a wave of the hand. I shall forget my black bottle—there is enough soothing syrup in it to send Jugglekeg into a delicious nap which will last long enough to enable me to get back into the Castle."

Little Knight volunteered to take Hollowpate's place, but too much depended upon him to run even that slight risk of his capture, unnecessarily. They were all so excited they decided it would be useless to go to bed until

Mother Heart-of-Gold had enacted her part with Jugglekeg, who was to come to Hollowpate's relief at midnight.

Meanwhile the Little Princess pressed her ring, and for the first time in centuries the little fairies were delighted by a repast from their own dear land, prepared by the loving hands of their own dear people, though their part in it consisted only of delicious whiffs from the roses which bedecked the board, and a drink of the dew that bejeweled their fragrant hearts; fairies do not need more substantial fare—the magic which had changed Mother Heart-of-Gold's form had not changed her nature; indeed it did not change the nature of any—fairy, mortal, or gnome. At first they thought they would send word of the Queen's and Mother Heart-of-Gold's arrival at the castle back to the fairies with the table, but decided on second consideration not to do so. It might only raise false hopes. After all, the Jewel was not yet regained. In the struggle to come, the most hazardous, desperate of all, who could tell but that the Gnomes, wily, cunning as they were, would not be victorious! Greatest care, utmost caution, must be observed, nothing decided upon hastily. They would wait till the morrow to form their plans.

Hollowpate was put to sleep, and his clothes borrowed while he felt no need of them. With great anxiety they awaited Mother Heart-of-Gold's return. She came in laughing softly.

“Jugglekeg lost no time in refreshing himself from the black bottle and my soothing syrup worked like a charm; in less than two minutes he was nodding in bliss; he will wake in such a short time he will not suspect anything amiss; I substituted another bottle for that on my way in and any drinks he may take from now on will

have only the usual effect. I called to him from some distance and found that nothing has been heard from the Bats' Eyrie; they are afraid to report the escape I suppose."

"They will be compelled to do so to-morrow. At dawn and at dusk each day they must be heard from or woe betide them!" said Fairasmorn. "So to bed early—to-morrow will be a Day of Events! Sleep sweetly, dear ones!"

CHAPTER XXVI

STRANGE DISCOVERIES

WHETHER or not there was magic in her words, they did sleep sweetly, Little Knight, the Little Princess and Letty; as to the two little fairies—but then fairies do not require as much sleep as mortals, and they had some very particular work to do!

They were up and reunited again bright and early, before dawn. Immediately after breakfast they repaired to the top story of one of the turrets to watch for the messenger from the Eyrie—except little Mother Heart-of-Gold, who took her place as near as she could to the window which Jugglekeg guarded, to hear any news his comrades might chance to bring him.

The watchers in the turret were unrewarded for a long time; the forest looked as usual, its tree tops waving in the morning breeze; now and then a Gnome smaller than ever from this height passed listlessly before the castle; but along about seven o'clock a dark speck shone clear against the sky in the direction of the Pinnacle; it became larger and larger and finally dissolved into what looked like a flock of black polka dots, skimming through the air; these gradually developed wings and soon a cloud of bats whizzed by.

“None would consent to bear the message alone, so the whole guard has come. Goromogore will be furious,”

said Fairasmorn as they left the turret and descended the stairs. "Our plans will depend upon his; but here comes Mother Heart-of-Gold; when we hear what she has to say we will go on a sight-seeing expedition." Little Knight was prevented from questioning by Mother Heart-of-Gold's exclaiming as soon as she caught sight of them:

"There is intensest excitement!" Her blue eyes were dancing, the red in her cheeks burning brightly. "The guard has returned in a body—Goromogore has every one of them in chains in the dungeon; they will not be released till the White Owl is 'safe' in his clutches again; but his plans are not formed yet, though he has sent searchers in all directions, even to my feared abode in the mountain—that will just suit us, for Jugglekeg will think Hollowpate has been enlisted in the service and we won't have to relieve him; I did not intend to do so until dusk and need not at all now unless it suits our plans. Goromogore will be too wrought up over the matter to know just who is on the hunt; he will either send some one else to Jugglekeg's relief or let him do double duty."

"I do hope they won't find Trickisy!" exclaimed Little Knight in consternation.

"Even if they do they can learn nothing from him; he is good to keep his knowledge to himself till between seven and eight o'clock this evening," said the little Queen consolingly, "and it will take him till nine or half past to find his way home."

"But supposing they carry him?"

"I don't think any of them will take that much trouble for Trickisy. He has been putting on too many airs to suit them, and it is a case of each one do his best for himself; they will be only too glad to know that he is

out of action; it will heighten their own chances to cover themselves with glory, for whoever finds me will be in great favor with the King. They do not know that I am forever beyond Goromogore's reach, safe in Castle Grim; oh, my dear Little Knight, how much we already owe you!"

"But I have had so much help," protested he, and the little Queen put a tiny hand on each of his pink cheeks and kissed him heartily, just like a mortal.

"There!" said she, "we will go now on our tour, for I know you are just aching to."

And to the amazement of all the mortals where did she lead them but to the great dining salon, and where did she stop but before the cabinet which boasted the great soup tureen! Mother Heart-of-Gold opened the doors and lifted the heavy cover from the huge dish.

"Get in, Mother," calmly commanded the Queen, and the little witch stepped confidently into the capacious vessel and smiled out at the three pairs of round eyes regarding her.

"Au revoir," said she gayly; the soup tureen commenced to move slowly downward. When the top of the peaked hat had disappeared, the shelf, which had fallen noiselessly, sprang just as noiselessly into place and the cabinet appeared as before, except that the lowest shelf was empty. However, the lid lying on the floor outside would proclaim to the curious what its burden had been, and they would think it was in the service usual to tableware.

"No wonder we couldn't find the secret passage—who would think of looking for a door in a dish!" ejaculated Little Knight.



“‘She looks like a great rose in a bowl,’ cried Little Knight admiringly.”

“And the truly amazing part of it is that the tureen may be removed and put to ordinary use and none would dream it was ever meant to hold anything but soup,” informed the little Queen. “Try to push down the shelf, Little Knight.” But strain as he might, the shelf was firm; even with the united efforts of Letty and the Little Princess it could not be budged.

“Aren’t they wonders! And you, too, to find out all about it!” said he at last as they desisted, with very red faces.

“You may credit our little Maids of Dew with that.” Fairasmorn pressed the outer edge, and as though it had been awaiting the signal, the soup tureen gently pushed the shelf upward toward the back of the cabinet, rose

high enough above it to allow of its replacement, then settled in its original position ready for another passenger. "Will you go next, Little Princess," asked the Queen, and in another moment she was seated within the "car," her fluffy skirts billowing around her.

"She looks like a great rose in a bowl," cried Little Knight admiringly, for closer companionship had fulfilled all his dreams of the Little Princess. Fairasmorn told her to press a button formed by the center of the principal flower in the decoration on the inside of the dish, and again it started on its trip to unknown regions. The little girl uttered a half-smothered "Oh" as she began to sink below the floor, but made no attempt to get out of her novel carriage. She knew that the little witch was waiting for her. She and Mother Heart-of-Gold were great friends by this time; the fairy had promised to make a brew for her in her little magic pot, and conjure up the Maids of Dew the first time she should visit Fairyland—and that was a great honor! The magic pot was very fascinating to the Little Princess. She had carried it around with her all morning.

Letty was afraid she wouldn't "fit" when her turn came to be enthroned in the tureen, but she slipped in as easily as any of them—for it was "magicked" too. Next Little Knight stepped boldly in, pressed the button and felt himself going—going—gone! The dining hall, the Fairy Queen vanished from his view, or rather he vanished from theirs; down, down he went in a dark shaft, but pretty soon he heard voices and knew the three earlier adventurers were near, awaiting him; then suddenly, softly, like a great bird settling on its nest, the monster dish came to a standstill on a low tabouret in a small octagon-

shaped room, lighted with odd-shaped jewel-studded lamps or lanterns, swung from the ceiling. The air came from a door draped with heavy curtains of a deep rich mahogany. Here were his companions, and they made merry while the unique vessel, as soon as it was relieved of its freight, ascended, apparently of its own accord, for the fourth time, and reappeared shortly with the last of the party who took the precaution of pressing another button on the opposite side of the vessel as soon as she "landed," and behold, when she stepped out, it remained as though anchored to the tabouret, fitting in harmoniously with its surroundings; for the little room was sumptuously furnished.

"And now, dearies, all the surprise which we cannot express in looks merely, must be kept to ourselves until we are safely back here again. You know 'walls have ears' and the slightest sound might betray us, for there are always some of the Gnomes around the Castle and we do not want them to know we have discovered their secret passage." All promised to remember Queen Fairasmorn's caution.

She led the way through the door into a long, narrow passage, ceiling, floor, and walls of which were built entirely of slabs of marble, oblong, set lengthwise up and down in the walls. Over the gleaming white pavement was laid a strip of thick carpet of the same rich mahogany shade as the curtains at the door.

The corridor made several abrupt turnings, and they were approaching another when the Queen stopped about midway in the passage. So far as they could observe, the spot where she paused was in nowise different from any other part of the corridor; the same monotonous ob-

longs above, and below, and at either side; the same strip of carpet leading on. But the little Queen knew better; she turned to the left, and lightly pressing one particular slab in each corner murmured in a very low voice:

“Marble slab, I thee implore
As I press thy corners four,
Turn thyself into a door;
We thy secrets would explore!”

Slowly the great slab turned outward, barring the passage, for it reached from wall to wall.

Almost fearing to draw a breath, the party stepped through the opening. The space beyond was about eight feet square, also walled and paved with marble as they saw before the slab adjusted itself into its proper place. A ray of light which sifted in through a hole in the wall to the right of them, shone intensely white in the absolute darkness and naturally attracted all attention.

Stepping into this, Fairasmorn motioned Little Knight to her side, and taking his hand led him to the opening. It was perfectly round, so he knew it was not an accidental knot hole, but had been made purposely. Obeying her gestures, he placed his eye to it; the next instant he drew back involuntarily, and almost forgetting her warning in his surprise, barely restrained himself from uttering an exclamation—for there, not three feet away, was a group of Gnomes talking and gesticulating vehemently, though he could not hear what was said. He was at last on the very threshold of the Gnomes' Stronghold!

It was a vast hall cut literally in the heart of the mountains; it was fitted up as a council chamber, with a long table down the center, at the head of which was a high-

backed armchair with a thronelike canopy above it. He did not need to be told that this was King Goromogore's seat. The room was illuminated by lights in numerous side brackets and a couple of odd, swinging chandeliers, though not all the chandeliers or brackets were utilized by any means. Other groups of the queer-looking little fellows stood around, all animated, all gesticulating; there seemed to be hundreds of them; and when he remembered that many more were out searching for the Fairy Queen and possibly not all of those who remained were in the hall, Little Knight could imagine the sense of powerlessness which must overcome the unfortunates who realized they were in their clutches. There and then he offered up a fervent thanksgiving that he had been spared falling into their toils thus far, and miraculously, as it seemed to him, been the means of rescuing the little group that surrounded him from their wicked spells. Oh, that he might regain the precious Jewel of the Forest! His heart beating to suffocation with the different emotions which rose within him, he turned to give his place to the Little Princess, placing his hand to his lips as an additional warning.

In turn they peeped into the Stronghold and Little Knight took another long and careful survey, trying to impress the general appearance of the place on his mind.

The secret door was found without trouble, for on this side it was rough, while the rest of the wall surface was highly polished; with a slight push on the upper right-hand corner it gave outward and they found themselves again in the long narrow passageway. Instead of turning back the road they had come the Queen kept going on; as before, they made several turnings, and finally, to the

amazement of the mortals, they "brought up" in the octagon room from which they had started.

"Well, I do declare!" exclaimed Letty.

"And so," remarked Little Knight, "anyone who did not know of the secret slab would simply circle round to the place he had left."

"That was Goromogore's idea. The slab is midway in the fifth corridor from here. The passage has nine sections; by turning to the left, as we did on leaving this room, the door is the middle, or ninth slab from the corner, on the left-hand side of the fifth section; turn to the right from here it is the middle or ninth slab on the right-hand side of the fifth section; so that the door to this room and the door to the secret chamber are exactly opposite each other. If the passage ran in a direct line from door to door it would only be the distance from the dining salon to the rear-end turret, whose base is underground, and in which Goromogore's secret room, opening into his Stronghold, is situated. But cutting the way with so many angles through the mountain is very confusing, as it was meant to be. You must keep strict count of the corners you pass or you are liable to go walking round and round all day!"

"It makes me dizzy just to think of it," said the Little Princess.

"Well, Girliekins," said Fairasmorn, "you have now been where but a select number of Goromogore's own tribe were ever privileged. Few even know of the existence of that room or passage. It was Goromogore's secret Stronghold and I have no doubt many a delinquent has been brought up in short order because of observations made through his ingenious spyglass, for 'while the cat is away

the mice will play.' The opening is invisible on the other side, though it is quite two inches in diameter in the secret chamber. It is a 'magicked' glass set in a door by which Goromogore frequently entered his Stronghold when none was near enough to observe him—and the surprises were just as frequent if not pleasant, you may be sure; probably some of the poor little fellows were scared out of their wits."

After the secret room and its possibilities were discussed the little Queen turned gravely to Little Knight.

"You have now seen the Stronghold of the Gnomes, dear Little Knight," said she, "and have some idea of the number of our enemies—truly they are as thick as locusts in pest time, and quite as destructive—to release all those who have unfortunately come under their spell, to free the grand old forest from its enchantment, those hosts of wicked little beings you must brave—into their midst in the very heart of the mountains you must penetrate; you have fearful odds to face, fearful risks to run, ere yet the Quest is ended; for it is there, in Goromogore's Stronghold, the Magic Jewel of the Forest is secreted—it is there, if you determine to continue the Quest you must seek it!"

The Little Princess turned pale, but clinched her hands and kept back the protest from her lips, the tears from falling from her eyes—she, too, must be brave, at least till her Little Knight was gone. Letty also knew she must not weaken his courage by useless crying; their only hope, the hope of so many, many unfortunates, rested upon the actions of this frail boy.

As for Little Knight, he only thought of that part of the Queen's speech relating to the Jewel. The rest he took as a matter-of-course; he had so long intended to come

upon the Quest, first on account of his father, later for the Little Princess, and had thought the whole thing over so often. He had expected to meet dangers, and was ready to attempt whatever their release required. Indeed, since he had entered the forest and found so many friends and knew they were all so distressed because of the wicked Gnome King's power, for their sakes, even were his father and the Little Princess and her nurse safe at home in the Kingdom, he would yet remain to try to regain the Magic Jewel. And so he exclaimed eagerly, his face alight with excitement:

"The Jewel—in the Stronghold—the hall we looked into to-day! Oh, if I may only regain it!" Whereupon, much to his amaze, they all fell upon him and kissed him, even the little witch.

"Regain it! To be sure you will!" exclaimed Fairasmorn, her eyes shining suspiciously and with a confidence she could only assume; for, after all, she knew how powerful Goromogore was.

"If I might try to-day—before Tricksy returns; if they do not hear it from him, they will not connect me with your escape, they will think I am afraid to leave the Castle; and I could then go among them much more safely." The little Queen sat studying a bit, then said slowly:

"That is very well thought of, Little Knight. After Tricksy returns and tells of his encounter with you, they will suspect at once that I am here and set a double watch upon the Castle; for besides having both birds in one cage then, they will be chagrined to learn you have been able to elude them, and gone out and come back without their knowledge. But while I know that the Magic Jewel is

hidden in the Stronghold I do not know exactly where—nor do I know all the ceremonies connected with its exhibition; I do know Goromogore is bound to bring it forth from its hiding place at certain intervals and to show it to his people. I am in hopes that we may learn something concerning his plans to-day, for I believe he will be anxious about the Jewel, and perhaps we may be better able to decide what is to be done later. Let us wait a while.”

CHAPTER XXVII

LITTLE KNIGHT TRANSFORMED

IT was a strange day both inside and outside the castle. Anxiety was the predominant feeling in every breast.

Jugglekeg was very much out of humor on account of his enforced presence at his post and absence from the scenes of excitement, which though it was for the most part silent, was extreme. He hailed every Gnome who passed his way; some barely acknowledged his salute, others shouted back and waved a friendly hand, but none approached near enough or stayed long enough to gratify his curiosity, till finally, well on toward five o'clock, a couple of his fellows either more good natured than the rest or glad to find so eager a listener so late in the day when all the "news" had been worn threadbare, willingly came over to where he was sitting on a huge boulder underneath the window, the other side of which the little witch and Little Knight were also "keeping guard." After jeering at him, as was their pleasant way, for allowing Hollowpate of all others to get ahead of him, they proceeded between them to give a graphic account of the topsy-turviness of affairs since the flight of the White Owl had been made known.

Goromogore was more than furious. The White Owl

was the only one outside the tribe who had learned anything about the Magic Jewel since it was in their possession. He was afraid she would find means to communicate her knowledge to the little terror in the castle. (Mother Heart-of-Gold and Little Knight exchanged an amused glance in their harbor under the sink.) There were all sorts of reports out concerning him. Goromogore had given Sharpwit a great raking over the coals; said he had a notion to put him on as "cook" for the mortals—to let a bit of a boy like that slip through his fingers! But Sharpwit swore he must be what the mortals call a "wizard" and their magic had no effect upon him; he had walked right through his Sea of Fire and came out without having so much as a hair singed! He had him safe in his cottage another time, but soon as he turned his head he vanished! Again, his mother had him securely bound and stepped around the corner of her hut to hail Fine-ear, and he was gone when she came back! As soon as they arrived they had set the Seven Brothers, who were more than usually ferocious from hunger, upon his track; they had "treed" him, but he managed to break the back of one, shot another in the side, and "magicked" the others so that they stood around like lambs and let him escape before they could reach them! Little Knight listened in astonishment to this garbled account of his adventures; evidently the wicked little spy would stop at nothing to clear himself. Indeed such tales he told—said the two Gnomes—that Goromogore, who was very superstitious, was frightened half out of his wits. He had called a general meeting in the Stronghold at half past seven this very evening, to decide what the next move should be!

“Oh, if I could only be there,” wailed Jugglekeg; he begged them to go to the King and explain his predicament; he would surely send him relief; but they refused. “If you send in any complaints to him now, like as not he’ll put you in irons; you are freer now than you would be in the dungeon at any rate!” and “I’m not going to risk being put in chains and miss all the excitement myself by carrying tales!” Jugglekeg groaned. “They say the little mortal is ‘magicked’ and wears a magic armor under his clothes and if he touches you you’ll drop unconscious—” (“The magic of a pure heart, the armor of unselfishness,” murmured the little fairy under the sink.) “Wobblejug and Guzzlemug said he must ‘acome up behind them that day Wobby’s cloak was taken; they were just walking peacefully along when all at once they dropped in their tracks, and when they woke it was near dark and Wobby’s cloak was gone—that’s what he wore and fooled poor old Hornyback, so he let him get up his Stair into the Castle. Hornyback was an awful nuisance, though, when we had to scrub and fix him, especially if he’d get in one of his tantrums; we might be thankful to the little wizard for getting him out of our way, if he wasn’t after the Magic Jewel.”

“I was there that day,” sighed Jugglekeg. “Won’t you come and tell me what happens when the meeting is over, Brownie?” he pleaded.

“Maybe I will,” replied Brownie condescendingly.

Little Knight ventured to peep as he heard the two rising to go. He knew which was Brownie at once; he looked more like a Brownie than a Gnome; the other, whom they addressed as Pokeypeeker, had a pair of sharp, gimletlike eyes and a sharp nose to match and such an

inquisitive cast of countenance altogether, that Little Knight thought his name a very appropriate one.

As soon as the Gnomes were out of sight Little Knight and his companion crept softly from under the sink and out of the kitchen; once in the corridor they flew to the bower where the others waited. What excitement Brownie's and Pokeypeeker's information caused in the little circle; it was felt that the time under the sink, where they had relieved each other at intervals all afternoon, had been well rewarded. The room fairly buzzed with flying questions and answers and surmises.

It was about six o'clock when Jugglekeg's companions left him; at seven the plans for regaining the Magic Jewel of the Forest were formed: Little Knight was to attend the meeting, where they all felt satisfied the Magic Jewel would be exhibited; if not he was to secrete himself somewhere in the hall and try to discover its place of concealment, or do whatever he himself felt best when he heard what Goromogore should decide upon doing.

And now was seen another result of the two little fairies' night of wakefulness. Little Knight was dressed in Hollowpate's clothes and a mask which fairy charm had made an exact counterpart of that little Gnome's countenance transformed him into so real a resemblance of Hollowpate, that Letty, meeting him in the corridor, grabbed him by the shoulder and was dragging him, with no gentle force, to the room wherein he was kept a prisoner; and even when Little Knight told her who he was, in his own voice, she would scarcely believe him, thinking he was only using his magic art to tempt her to release him, and so escape; Little Knight reminded her that inside the castle Hollowpate's magic art could not now avail,

but she still looked doubtful till he pulled off the mask and disclosed his own smiling face turned up to her.

"Bless your heart," said she in bewilderment, "if you wouldn't fool old Goromogore or Tricksy himself!"

"Would I, Letty," cried he delightedly; "that's what I want to do!"

"Indeed then you would!" said she admiringly; "the



"Letty . . . grabbed him by the shoulder."

looks of you, and the acts of you, and the voice of you! And how you can turn yourself into one of them pesky little creatures is beyond me!"

And when the Little Princess talked to him for ten minutes and had to be told who he was at last, the three conspirators were satisfied that the first part of their work

would be likely to prove successful when he went among the Gnomes.

"It's a good thing Hollowpate is not much of a talker; I am more apt to betray myself by my voice or what I say than any other way," remarked the masquerader as they trooped to the kitchen, for he must start forth for the last time, immediately, on the Quest.

Mother Heart-of-Gold left them standing at the door, while she stole to the window where Jugglekeg's Black Bottle stood silhouetted against the fast-fading light; in a twinkling it was picked up and another stood in its place; so dextrous, so quick was the movement, that the Little Princess, who was watching intently, winked her eyes and scarcely believed the thing was done, when the little witch was back among them. Then breathlessly they watched for its disappearance on the other side. Jugglekeg was taking a long time between drinks, it seemed to the impatient group; but at last it did vanish, and in a reasonable time for a couple of gulps to be swallowed, stood once more on the sill. Mother Heart-of-Gold, followed noiselessly by the others this time, crossed the floor again, climbed upon the sink, listened silently, then thrust her head cautiously outside. In a trice she drew it in again, changed the bottles once more, and jumped down to the floor.

"Now, Little Knight, not a moment is to be lost—you must be out of sight before he awakens."

It was a good thing that haste was imperative; not one of them could have kept from breaking down; they could scarcely utter their good wishes. Little Knight was released from their embraces with just breath enough left to jump to the window sill, wave his hand, and vault down softly beside the unconscious Jugglekeg. They watched

him until he turned in the direction of the Dragon's Stair, then like Bully and Goggle-Eyes, not wanting to risk bad luck by watching him out of sight, they hastened to the main hall and stood inside the great front doors, which they had closed long before, and stood listening.

If Little Knight's disguise was discovered by any of the guards on the Dragon's Stair they would know it by the noise and throw wide the doors, and do their best to attract attention so that he might have a chance to escape; breathlessly they waited, but all was quiet; then Queen Fairasmorn said to the Little Princess:

"Come, Girliekins, dry your pretty eyes; you know we must watch for our Little Knight and be ready to do our part when the fateful moment arrives! Perhaps we shall be able to see him enter."

This put new life into all—this having something to do is magic itself for either fairy or mortal—how it does make the time fly! And they hurried "Souptureenward."

CHAPTER XXVIII

LITTLE KNIGHT JOINS THE GNOMES

WOTHER is watching and praying for me, too," was Little Knight's consoling thought as he reached the broad road that swept before the castle, which gleamed white in the moonlight. He gulped down a great lump the parting in the kitchen had raised in his throat, winked his eyes hard and made himself think only of what he had to do as he turned determinedly into the road. As his quick footsteps brought him nearer the Dragon's Stair where his disguise must meet its first test under the searching glances of his enemies, his heart beat high with excitement. Keeping Hollowpate in his mind, he assumed his walk and sauntered aimlessly along, looking once or twice at the line of grotesque figures sitting on the upper step ready to pounce upon him as soon as he put his foot across the threshold. But they did not recognize him! Evidently they knew nothing of Jugglekeg's dilemma and Hollowpate's supposed absence with the White Owl searching party. Some were gazing silently at the moon, others muttering to each other, grumbling at the hard fate which kept them from attending the coming meeting. Little Knight intended going on till he should come across some of the little fellows on their way to the Council Chamber and either join or follow them to the Stronghold. He knew the secret room in the turret opened

into the Council Chamber and supposed the entrance to the Stronghold would not be so far from the castle. He had expected to meet some of them ere this, and was mystified at the entire absence of life around him; however, it was but a quarter past the hour, according to the clock in the bower, so he walked on in Hollowpate's aimless manner though he was beginning to get anxious; what if, after all, he should be unable to gain access to the Stronghold—what if—but his wonderings were ended.

"Halloo, Patey! Hon-nk!" he heard himself accosted, and turning round saw a Gnome, a stranger to him, as most all of them must be, running after him.

"Halloo, 'self!" he answered in Hollowpate's always good-humored way.

"Many gone? Snor-rt!" and Little Knight was suddenly enlightened; the queer little Gnome with the odd noises like those made by an impatient horse was surely none other than "Snorty!"

"Nary one 's I've seen. Where've you been, Snorty?" he hazarded.

"Early? Haw-wk! Thought it was half after seven—snor-rt! Been taking a snooze. Guess we're in for a time to-night, jewel's to be exhibited—hon-nk! Let's go to the Shops."

"But it's a quarter past the hour now," protested Little Knight, who had reasons of his own for wishing to be in the Council Chamber as soon as possible.

"Cheerful's at the door this evening; won't let us in till right on the stroke—haw-wk-haw-wk; here come Janglejig and Jarry, hon-nk! Come 'long to the Shops boys, snor-rt!"

The two joined them; the little fellows were now com-

ing thick and fast from the forest, as if Snorty's 'snor-rt,' a most unpleasant sound, had signaled them. Several joined them ready to go to the shops while others kept on their way to the meeting; Little Knight felt like joining the latter, but stayed on with his first companion, who, being an incessant talker, although one most annoying for mortal ears to listen to, made it unnecessary for him to speak except in monosyllables once or twice. Janglejig was almost as hard to listen to as was Snorty; he commenced his sentences in one key, sometimes way down in the bass, sometimes as far up in the treble, and sometimes striking middle "C"; but he never failed to change it with startling suddenness even if he only spoke three words; like Snorty—and almost every being, mortal or other, who does some one thing in a particularly bad way—he delighted in "speechifying" and ran a close second to Snorty in the talking line. On the contrary, Jarry was a glum little party who only opened his lips to make some cutting remark that would be sure to "jar" on the nerves of the one to whom, or of whom, he spoke.

Seven or eight were in the crowd that stopped a few minutes later beside a huge boulder which jutted out into the roadway at the base of the mountain.

"Rock, rock,
Skip and hop,
Let us in our
Great Workshop!"

cried Snorty and Janglejig together.

"That chorus is enough to make the whole mountain frisk like a lamb for very terror," quoth the glum little Jarry, but no one seemed to mind either him or the rock,

which did skip out from the mountain a foot, then hopped sideways along its base another, leaving a narrow opening to view from which came a dull "thud! thud!" like the distant roar of machinery. The passage was just wide enough for one to walk along comfortably, so they marched in single file for several yards in utter darkness; then came an abrupt turning; the roar was louder. A lurid red glare shone at the far end of this second passage, and with a quick-drawn breath Little Knight stepped from it into the Gnomes' workshop. So vast a place it seemed, though crowded with machinery and with furnaces belching forth hot flames, he thought the whole mountain must have been disemboweled to form it. The noise, the whirl, the cracking, the crashing, the commingled sounds, were deafening; he could see Snorty's and Janglejig's lips moving at a rapid rate, but could not hear their voices; and then he saw, and started violently, a man—a mortal—standing half naked before one of those gleaming, red-hot furnaces, the sweat pouring from his body! He was doing something with a long pincerlike instrument, while beside him, sitting in the shadow, was a little Gnome, like a veritable imp, with a pitchfork with which he gave the tired worker a prod when he paused an instant to shake the sweat from his eyes! This, then, was what Squatty meant when he had said he would "have to prod this afternoon"—oh, the fiends! Little Knight made a step forward, caught Jarry's malicious glance fixed full upon him and stopped in his tracks. Jarry stepped close to him and shouted in his ear:

"If you had any mind in your head I should say the heat has affected it, but your poor pate's hollow!"

"Hollow 'self," called back Little Knight, but in spite

of the intense heat he was in a cold sweat—he had almost betrayed himself. He must not let his feelings run away with his good sense; but, oh, how eagerly he looked into each gaunt face with the hollow, hopeless eyes, as the crowd sauntered, unheeded by the poor creatures, from furnace to furnace! One form, of which he caught a sudden glimpse, for a moment made his heart rise to his throat—the head, the shoulders, the very gestures—but the same gaunt face with long beard, the same hopeless look in the eyes, the same monotonous, patient stooping to the task, met him when he got closer. Little Knight gazed earnestly at him a moment; he would have liked to take his hand, to stroke the worn face, because he resembled that dear one, but he dared not even look sympathetically at him for fear the poor fellow in his astonishment might betray him and their last hope be lost. As they turned to retrace their steps he saw a long scar on the man's breast. His heart swelled almost to bursting. How glad he was to get out under the pale silent stars!

“We've got just about five minutes to make it, snor-rt! We've got to play tiddledywinks with our toes in the gravel, hon-nk!”

Little Knight's heart went down; how he wished he had left the loquacious Snorty and chanced going with those others who could not be coaxed to join them! But it could not be helped now! All pulling their hoods on more securely, they fairly “scooted” back over the way they had come a few minutes before; halfway between the shop and the castle they stopped where a mass of thorny bushes bristled over the mountain side clear down to the very road.

“G'wan, Janglejig, follow up Patey—I'm next,

hon-nk!" On hands and knees fell Janglejig, Little Knight followed suit, and knew from the incessant stream of talk that Snorty was behind him.

He expected to be well scratched by the time they were through the thicket, but after the first few feet their path was easy enough. They crawled through a green tunnel, soft and fragrant, coming out on an open space on the mountain side. With sighs of relief they straightened the kinks out of their backs and the wrinkles out of their clothes.

"Hon-nk!" ejaculated Snorty excitedly. "We must be late; not a one in sight!" and with a rush, pellmell, they cleared the space and ran as fast as their legs would carry them along a road cut in the side of the mountain; it was wide enough for five or six to walk abreast, but on one hand the mountain fell straight downward, on the other rose as straight toward the sky. An eerie path to travel in such strange company with the moonlight making queer shadows across the rocky way! No wonder the blood quickened in Little Knight's veins, but looking upward at the old moon sailing so majestically, so calmly in the blue, and knowing it was shining over all the homes in the Kingdom just as it did here, that his mother was probably gazing, too, at its bright round face and thinking of him, it seemed to him like an old friend and brought his own kind nearer to him.

A turn in the road, a dart through a mass of vines which appeared to be growing against the solid earth, brought them into another footpath which they followed in single file again downward, always down, and, Little Knight observed, always in direction of the castle, till they were stopped by a grotesque, hooded figure, squatting

like a great toad on a big white rock, which apparently had been rolled from the mouth of a black pit which yawned before them.

"What's the rush?" asked the squatter laconically, in a familiar cracked voice, and Little Knight recognized the broad, good-natured countenance of Squatty.

"Rush? Snor-rt," panted Snorty.

"I'm clean tuckered out," wailed Janglejig in three different minor keys which made everything in this weird spot seem weirder than ever.

"Yes; it's only ten minutes after seven. Can't get in till half past!" Snorty turned to Hollowpate:

"You told me half an hour ago it was a quarter past." Though his heart leaped with joy, Hollowpate's mouth fell open foolishly.

"The clock told me," he mumbled.

"Pate's empty," glumly remarked Jarry. The laugh which followed this sally restored his good humor which, never very good at the best, had been thoroughly shaken by the unnecessary run.

"Let's go in, Squatty, dear Squatty, do! I thought Cheerful was to've been doorkeeper; I wouldn't think of asking him, but I'm clean tuckered out," coaxed Janglejig wailingly in several basso chords and unexpected treble trills.

"Cheerful's got the toothache."

"But we met several others coming this way, hon-nk, quite a long time ago, snor-rt! Where are they, haw-wk—inside! I know you, Squatty, old fellow! Hon-nk-hon-nk do let us in!"

"All right then, but if Goro raises a fuss take your share of the medicine; don't try to put it all off on me as

that crowd of sneaks did before." They all disclaimed being such "flunks," and Squatty said:

"Well, I guess I'm full of foolish! Word!"

Janglejig stepped forward and whispered something in his ear. Little Knight's pulses almost stopped beating—the Password—he had forgotten they might use one or he could have managed to learn it from Snorty; but



"Janglejig stepped forward and whispered something in his ear."

it was too late now; already Janglejig was at the edge of the black opening and Snorty was giving him a nudge.

"Word!" called Squatty again.

"He'll be here till dawn chasing it round that spare room of his," protested the glum Jarry; he elbowed his way ahead, whispered the magic word in Squatty's listen-

ing ear, then on to the pit, drawing down his mouth and making moon eyes at Hollowpate as he did so.

"Hurry, Patey." Snorty and the others in the line were chuckling at Jarry's joke. "Snor-rt, show him you've played tag often enough to catch up once in a while."

"Word!" sang Squatty monotonously; Hollowpate scratched his head and grinned vacuously.

"Guess I'm full of foolish, too," he murmured apologetically. "Ever since old Hornyback belched his fire out at me I can't seem to remember the particularest things!" hoping to get through with this excuse.

"That's so, it's a shame to worry the poor little beast," sang out a voice in the rear. The sympathies of the whole crowd were awakened. "Patey," as he was familiarly called by his intimates, came as near being a universal favorite as there was in Gnomeland. Though often he was the butt of their jokes, his very "simpleness" and good nature won whatever affection they were capable of feeling and made them each feel a personal responsibility for him.

"He's excited, too! Hon-nk!" added Snorty, while he whispered in Patey's ear, "Tu whit tu whoo!"—and aloud, "I believe, haw-wk—he's got it now!"

They all knew he had, even the keeper of the door, who discreetly lowered his eyes and smiled, while the others shouted. Little Knight's quick thought in mentioning Hollowpate's accident with Hornyback would have quieted all suspicion had there been any, but not a Gnome there had the least doubt that Hollowpate was not inside his own clothes! He walked forward and whispered the magic countersign with a look of importance that "brought down the house," then stood aside, for he did not know

what to do when he once reached the edge of the pit. He had been so engrossed trying to solve the enigma of getting by without the password that he had not seen the manner in which the first two had made their disappearance.

"Come along, Patey, hon-nk!" and the delighted Snorty took his arm and whisked over to the edge of the hole. It proved to Little Knight's astonished eyes to be a well, a real well, with real water sparkling in the moonlight about ten feet below! But no bucket hung in it, and no ladder or steps were in sight. How did they descend; they must dive into it; and not knowing its depth or what to expect or to do he would doubtless drown.

"Go ahead, Patey, haw-wk!" admonished Snorty.

"I—I'm afraid of getting wet!" Snorty threw back his head and ha-ha'd.

"Patey's made a joke, boys, snor-rt!" he cried, "Patey's made a joke!" And quite as a matter-of-course he gave Little Knight, who stood on the brink, a sudden push; one second the thought flashed through his mind that the Gnomes had penetrated his disguise and had been, as Tricksey said, playing with him; the next he felt himself swung inward to the side of the well, not more than six inches above the water, and before he had time to draw a good breath Snorty stood beside him. They were in an arched passage roughly hewn in the mountain; at the far end hung an ornamental lantern; this he found was at the top of a flight of steps which terminated in a flagged space about twenty feet square and faced a broad arched doorway which led directly into the General Meeting Room, the Stronghold of Strongholds of Goromogore the Terrible! Snorty had been talking all the while and laughing at Patey's joke.

"Just like a mortal, snor-rt!" said he. "Hon-nk—pretty good scheme of, snor-rt, Tricksy's. Do you remember how Goromogore, haw-wk, protested he didn't want to, hon-nk, change his clothes every time we had a meeting? Haw-wk, and Tricksy then told him of the suction plan! Of course the mortals would never suspect that, snor-rt, and if the improbable should happen, hon-nk, and any of them—say this Little Knight Brave, as his people call him—should trace us to the opening, he'd find only a well, snor-rt, and would be afraid even to sample the water for fear of it's being magicked! Hon-nk!" Little Knight chuckled with quite a different kind of enjoyment than Snorty imagined.

"Full of foolish," murmured he. Then: "And if he did take the plunge and get in, he would never know how to get out!" The reply to this wily though apparently innocent remark he awaited with greatest eagerness—he might learn all, or nothing!

"No; he'd never think, hon-nk, that all he'd have to do would be to turn a pillar at the other end of the hall, snor-rt, three times round and three times back, haw-wk, and he'd find a staircase straight up to a passage that would lead him to the road directly, snor-rt, under the rock at the entrance to the Workshop!

"Rock, Rock, roll away,
Let me see the light of day!"

sang the little Gnome whose tongue never knew when to stop. Little Knight's eyes lighted with pleasure but he kept them lowered. All he did not know now was which pillar to turn, a "poser" truly, but he must trust to his good fortune to discover that; and after all, he reflected,

the turning would take too long to think of using the staircase while the Gnomes were present, and should he be left alone in the hall, he could try each one till he found the right one.

By this they had clattered down the long flight of stairs and crossed the flagged entrance way. A great lot of queer little objects were piled up in a corner. Snorty took one and hooked it on to the front of his hood.

"We mustn't forget our lamps," said he. Little Knight quite as a matter-of-course followed his example, and they were ready to enter the Council Chamber!

Little Knight had viewed it from the secret room several times, for he and Queen Fairasmorn had made a second trip that afternoon by way of the Soup Tureen, and he had thought he would recognize the hall and know just where he was if he should succeed in entering it; but on the threshold he stopped in amaze; the longer he looked the more positive he became that he had never gazed upon this place before. He was convinced the meeting room was an entirely different one from that into which the secret door led. The plans they had made could not be carried out. He must think of another way of escape should he be so fortunate as to get the Magic Jewel. He would have to risk the loss of time necessary to open the pillar which contained the staircase—and he must find it! Of course if he did not succeed in getting possession of the Jewel he could keep his character of Hollowpate and live with the Gnomes as long as necessary to secure it, if possible. There was one consolation, if he regained possession of the precious gem, whether he escaped or not, Goromogore's power was gone, the Gnomes were doomed, the forest and all within its depths freed from their enchantment—

all they destroyed then, they must destroy as mortals might—in open battle. But if he were killed—but what good to think of that! And Little Knight's thoughts flew to those in the castle—they must know ere this that the meeting was to be held in a different hall from the one they supposed; how disappointed they must be!

Even as he was thinking he was gazing around at the vast chamber, to the other end of which was a good walk; the shops had seemed to take up the whole inside of the mountain but this was almost as large. What workers these tireless little beings must be! But stay—though their ingenuity may have planned these great halls, it was more than likely the poor unfortunate warriors who had been coming into the forest for centuries had been compelled to do the real work! Dozens of natural spaces, craters or caves or whatever they might be called, had been merged into these vast caverns or halls. Countless chandeliers and side brackets from the rocky roof and walls lighted dozens and dozens of long tables, the same as he had seen through the magic glass.

There must have been two hundred or more of the little men already gathered in groups in different parts of the room, but so great was the space they seemed a mere handful. Little Knight did not linger long at the entrance; he must hasten his search for the pillar—it seemed it would be a needle-in-the-haystack sort of job, for there were myriads of them whichever direction he looked. However, Snorty had said “the other end,” and so to the other end Hollowpate, sauntering in his aimless way, led his unconscious companion.

CHAPTER XXIX

IN THE GNOME KING'S STRONGHOLD

BUT even that clew did not amount to much, he was beginning to think; there were pillars—pillars everywhere; he was discouraged by their number. Then he commenced to observe more closely. He found that every other pillar was perhaps one half greater in circumference than its companion; that, while on first glance from the entrance they seemed set in any place and every place, now that he approached the far end of the hall and he became accustomed to viewing them, the confusion gradually untangled; they stood in straight rows, not helter-skelter as he had thought, then—his heart gave a bound; unconsciously he had counted them—in each row across the hall there were just nine columns—five large, with the smaller ones between, which brought a large one to the center! Goromogore's magic number—nine—the nine passages to the secret room, the middle passage held the secret entrance; the nine slabs the length of each division of the corridor, the middle slab of which was the secret door! Little Knight kept his gaze riveted on the line of big center pillars, up to the last row—in the center one of which he was almost sure was the secret stairway! For the moment as the thought struck him, he stood as if fascinated, then sauntered aimlessly on again.

As they came yet nearer the other end he saw it

widened out to take in what had been a roomy cavern at the right, and a smaller cave or alcove on the left. The tables in this portion of the hall were placed in the opposite direction from those in the narrower, though larger part, and as he stepped into it, instantly the place assumed familiar outlines—it was the chamber he had seen from the secret room!

Joy, joy! There was Goromogore's chair, with now a great, nine-branched candelabra standing on the floor either side of it and rising almost to the canopy above. As yet they held no candles but the side brackets and chandeliers were all lighted, though unlike those in the main portion of the hall which were turned on full, they were burning as low as possible without being extinguished.

Little Knight faced about and sauntered down toward the end, opposite Goromogore's throne, where he knew was the secret room; but in the wall of rough stone he could discern no resemblance to any kind of an opening, nor was there any trace of the magic spyglass. When he was at the foot of the table, directly opposite Goromogore's chair, he stooped three different times to tie his queerly shaped shoe!

"I'm tired," said he to Snorty, "let's rest a while."

"Not here," said one of those who had joined them and who was appropriately addressed as Runty. "It's too dim and lonesome to suit my complexion. Let's go out near the entrance and watch the arrival! Clock must be on the half stroke now."

"I'm too tired," Little Knight murmured.

"That's so, you were out on the search, weren't you, Patey? Well, rest up a bit."

"Don't go to sleep, snor-rt!" admonished his first

friend. "You know you'll be yanked out of this quicker'n lightnin', hon-nk, and we won't be able to keep you a seat."

"No; there'll be a tremendous crowd, with everyone for himself."

"Maybe they'll leave me alone," said Hollowpate with a yawn.

"Maybe they will!" and they laughed derisively. "Why, every seat is sure to be filled to-night with the Sharpwits and all the extra fines!"

"Well, I don't mind the Bearers and the Councilors having special places but, snor-rt, when it comes to rubbish like Sharpwit and his ilk, I think, haw-wk, Patey and I and the rest of us are just as good. It ought to, snor-rt, be first come first served, snor-rt, hon-nk!"

"That's what I say—all right, Patey, you stand on your rights or go to sleep on 'em and see the nightmare you'll have—I don't envy you!" But Hollowpate was apparently already half nodding, and laughing at the idea of his hobnobbing with the Councilors, they clattered off.

As soon as the sound of their footsteps grew faint, Little Knight lifted his head cautiously, then slowly rising approached the wall just opposite the foot of Goromogore's table; he pressed his ear against the rough stone and listened with all his might; in a moment he fancied he heard a far-away tap, three times, and with a sigh of relief he straightened up; not a second too soon, for the clatter of footsteps was heard again; with a few quick steps he was back in his chair and looked around with a yawn as if just waking, as a trio of queer little fellows he had not seen before appeared.

"Halloo, Hollowpate," one of them greeted him indifferently; the second nodded to him, while the third conde-

scended only a glance. Hollowpate nodded back, and rising, sauntered lazily around to the far side of the table. The three little Gnomes stood, hands in pockets, gazing silently about the room a few moments, then the first went to the nearest side bracket, pulled a chain which depended from it, brought down one of the lights within reach, and silently ignited the wick of his lamp; the second and third repeated the performance; then, silently as they came, they turned with one accord and walked out. Alike as peas they were; Little Knight afterwards learned they were called Silent, More-Silent and Most-Silent—the latter two being addressed simply as “More” and “Most” for short. He had observed them closely out of the side of his eye, and as soon as they left he took a turn at the chain pulling; soon clear and serene his little flame burned above his forehead.

There was a row of glasses down each side of every table in the hall, and in front of Goromogore's place were nine in a line across the table, with one larger one standing by itself opposite the center glass in the line; this Little Knight took to be the King's. They were stem glasses of clearest crystal, about the size and shape of the morning glories that climbed up and looked in the window of the little kitchen at home. The nine in front of Goromogore suggested an idea to Little Knight, and as soon as he lighted his lamp, having this end of the hall to himself, he proceeded to put it into execution. Stooping half over, so that he would be concealed by the table, he went as fast as he could toward Goromogore's place, but when he reached it, he stood irresolute with a small phial which Mother Heart-of-Gold had given him containing one drop of her soothing syrup, in his hand. So much depended

upon that precious drop! Once poured from the little phial it would be lost to him—he could not get it back—what should he do, and into which glass should it be poured—the King's, or that center one in the line before which Goro's stood? He could not make up his mind; but all at once there was a crash that made him jump almost out of Hollowpate's shoes! He must decide quickly! The crash was followed by the most hideous din that had ever assailed mortal ears. Crash-clang-boom-bang-crack-clackety-crickety-bizz-bang-clang-boom-crackety-clickety! all together and then once more, separately and in every imaginable, ear-splitting, hair-raising way.

The buzz of voices had ceased or was drowned in the fearful noises. Rising far enough to take one quick glance over the table, Little Knight saw the narrow part of the hall was packed to suffocation with a dense mass of Gnomes against each side wall, leaving an aisle through the center and all the lights on the peaked hoods were turned toward the entrance! Now was the time to empty the little amber phial; his decision was made. His hand twinkled over the center glass in the row one breathless moment and was withdrawn! But the glass still looked empty—the magic liquid was colorless.

The banging and crashing continued; it was evidently made by the Gnomes' band—they surely had a queer idea of music! He had not been a moment too soon, for he saw the first members of the band, which headed the procession, enter the lower end of the hall just as he dropped behind the table again, intending to crawl under it and so out on the side near the main portion of the room, where the majority of the Gnomes were. From his place of concealment he caught a glimpse of a confused tangle of vivid

green-stockinged legs advancing up the aisle. He held his hands to his ears as the noise became louder and shriller and more discordant; legs in brightest blue came next, then a flame of crimson. When that passed Little Knight ventured to crawl forth. The procession had turned toward the foot of the table. He rose unnoticed to his feet, or if any saw him they paid no attention; it was only "Patey" who must have fallen asleep in the forbidden territory, and had been awakened by the King's arrival, scared half to death, no doubt, when he realized where he was! Then Little Knight watched with the rest.

The band wore a uniform of pink-and-green satin and carried the oddest instruments ever seen. Some were beaten upon like drums, others clashed as cymbals, blown on as horns, wound like hand organs, played as harmonicas—any way and every way that noise could be made without resorting to gunpowder, it seemed to the intrepid little mortal in the crowd, noise was made! Following the band came a number of very old Gnomes having long, gray beards, and dressed in brightest blue, each carrying a candle; they walked in the form of a circle, surrounding the most majestic-looking Gnome Little Knight had yet seen, and his heart thumped hard against his ribs, for he knew that at last he was in the presence of the renowned Goromogore, the Gnome King—Goromogore the Terrible, who if he once laid hands upon him with hostile intent, would have him in his dread power as long as life should last! And there was only this six feet of polished wood between them, and hundreds of his subjects ready to obey the least lifting of his hand, pushing right at Little Knight's elbows! No wonder the majestic figure fascinated him! He walked in the exact center of the circle of gray-bearded

ancients; dressed all in white with a beautifully jewel-embroidered royal purple robe flowing loosely from his shoulders; he was larger and handsomer than any of his subjects. He, too, wore a heavy beard, but it was cut



“He was larger and handsomer than any of his subjects.”

square, right above the middle of his breast. His face was grave; his eyes, gray as shaded pools, looked alert and attentive; his broad forehead was partly covered by his hood, for none removed his headgear. Spite of his wickedness, he looked more fit to be their King than any of the crowds of Gnomes Little Knight had beheld.

Back of the Royal Ring of Councilors came the Crown Bearer in unrelieved crimson, from top to toe. He, too, as he bore his precious burden on a crimson velvet cushion, was encircled by a guard in bright unrelieved yellow. Beyond them Little Knight did not look. He was absorbed in watching the head of the procession. As soon as the King entered the reserved portion of the hall all the lights had blazed brightly up, except in the small cave or alcove back of Goromogore's chair, the floor of which was raised one step above that of the rest of the hall; into this recess the band marched and stationed themselves, hammering and blowing their clashing instruments—of torture, mortals would call them. Next the graybeards marched round the back of the throne chair, the first fitting his candle into the topmost socket of the candelabra, whose branches had been lowered for this part of the ceremony, how or when Little Knight had not observed, then marching on till he stood behind the ninth chair from the head of the table, on the same side that Little Knight now was. The others followed suit until the nine branches each held its starry light and the nine chairs at the upper end of the table were guarded, each by its gray-bearded Councilor. The remaining members of the Royal Ring then filled the candelabra on the other side of Goromogore's chair, and faced his companion from the opposite side of the table. Goromogore, who on the breaking of the circle had advanced to his place before the candles had been set, raised his hand—the starry tapers lifted till they were far above his head; he then seated himself in his Throne chair and the Crowning of the King began. The eight yellow-clad figures of the circle separated allowing the ninth, or Crown Bearer, to advance. He first knelt in front of His Maj-

esty, then rising and going behind the chair, placed the crown upon the monarch's head. This accomplished, Goromogore again raised his hand and the music or discord ceased; the band marched from the now apparently empty alcove, and took their places at a table in one corner of this part of the hall. Another wave and the rest of the Gnomes who had been in the procession and had lined up back of the chairs either side of the King's table, together with the Councilors, seated themselves.

No sooner had they done so than a terrible frown seamed Goromogore's forehead. Little Knight shrank back as did all around him; the King's accusing finger seemed to be pointing directly at him. However, it was not at him, but at an unfortunate little fellow behind whose chair he was standing. He had forgotten to light his lamp—this seemed to be an inexcusable breach. Silently two guards appeared, as if out of the floor; the terrified little Gnome was yanked from his seat and ushered out of the hall. Little Knight wondered if that was considered punishment enough or if he were put in the dungeon. How thankful he felt toward the silent trio who had reminded him of his lamp! He stood, his hands unconsciously grasping the back of the empty chair, gazing in a dazed way at the King—but had Goromogore, sharper than the rest, seen through his disguise, or was there, after all, something wrong about him—he was pointing his finger again—and this time there was, alas! no doubt about it—right at him! He would be ejected, perhaps imprisoned; his heart went away down, but his courage did not desert him. Always a crisis made him think quickly and act with decision, as if at the word “danger” his forces rallied, his brain cleared. One glance showed a sea of

faces surging up around him, and when he saw Jarry's sour, spiteful little visage looming close at his shoulder, he felt, indeed, he was in the midst of enemies; but the look in the little gooseberry eyes was not triumphant as he fancied it would be at his downfall; rather, it seemed envious! Little Knight, who, after the one quick glance, had become more Hollowpatish than ever, with wide, vacant eyes and foolishly drooping lower lip, realized why when Goromogore said:

"Place yonder lout in the vacant seat of honor; hollow though his pate may be, it seemeth not too empty to remember his King's commands!" He felt himself lifted high from the floor and deposited gently in the forgetful little Gnome's place! He then understood Jarry's look of envy. He was jubilant, not only because his fears were groundless, but his position just suited his plans; he had been wishing, without the least idea his wish would be granted, for a place at this table; he grinned around foolishly at his companions and saw Sharpwit's hatchet face at the lower end, opposite Goromogore. Perhaps his placid good-natured countenance restored the King's own good humor, for he smiled and his eyes twinkled; smothered laughter was heard all around; it seemed so comical to see Hollowpate, of all others, among the wiseheads! There was a subdued cackling all over the hall and Little Knight was made even more comfortable when Goro said:

"Remove Sir of the Glum Countenance to the other end of the Hall!" Whereon there was more laughter and Little Knight turned with the others in time to see the discomfited Jarry led through the jeering mob; Jarry's place behind him had made him uneasy; he felt distrustful of the little Gnome.

When quiet was restored the King again spoke:

"Let Pokeypeeker serve the wine; thus being kept busy himself we may hope to keep his nose out of other people's affairs!" At this genial mandate Pokeypeeker arose with alacrity from a near-by table. The order, even the pleasantry which went with it, was considered an honor! He disappeared behind Little Knight and when he again came to view he was followed by three other Gnomes known as wine bearers; they carried a curious tray of triangular shape, with a handle at each corner, the flat end being held to the front. It rose in the center like an old-fashioned caster of nine rings, each holding a decanter of wine. Little Knight saw that Pokeypeeker was expected to serve only at the King's table, for at all the tables round a like group was busy.

Walking gravely to the head of the table, Pokeypeeker took a decanter from the holder and poured the King's glass to the brim with a sparkling amber-colored liquor; next the nine in front of him, then those of the nine gray-beards each side; after that straight down one side of the table and up the other. Hollowpate was only one remove from the Councilors and had a good view of all that went on at the head of the table. When all the little crystal morning glories were filled Goromogore waved his hand; a complete silence ensued, and Goromogore spoke.

All the exciting events that were even then taking place in "Gnomeland," as he called the forest, were touched upon; the utter inability of their best scouts to entrap the latest seeker on the Quest had convinced them he was a wizard in boy's form. They had him at last in the Castle but they could not take credit to themselves for even that good fortune; it was the result of his own magic by which

he had entrapped himself; however, to try to keep him there was now the duty of each and every one of them; their vigilance would not be taxed for long, for mortals cannot live without food, and the supply which had been left in the Castle must be nearly exhausted; but this Little Knight Brave, as he was rightly called he must say, was not their greatest trouble at present. The White Owl had escaped; no trace of her whereabouts had as yet been discovered, unless Tricksy, who had been absent now since dawn the day before, had found one and was following it up. But until she was recaptured it was deemed advisable to remove the Jewel of the Forest from its present place in the Stronghold. Here he paused and Little Knight listened eagerly, but was doomed to disappointment. Goromogore did not tell where they intended to secrete the precious gem after to-night. But his heart leaped excitedly when he remarked, "Before discussing plans we will have the Exhibition of the Jewel. Let the Casket Bearers come forth!"

Hollowpate yawned, then grinned a silly grin at his companions—he never smiled—but the phrase, "the Casket Bearers, the Casket Bearers," was ringing in his ears. All the directions Queen Fairasmorn had earnestly impressed upon his mind in the secret room a few hours ago returned to him; he must watch every movement now carefully, carefully. He glanced at the glass wherein he had poured the magic drop; how earnestly he hoped it would prove to be the right one! But all these thoughts only took a second. His every sense was alive, and on the alert! Where were the "Casket Bearers?"

CHAPTER XXX

“TU OSTH GIL”

WHEN back in the dimly lighted alcove right against the wall, Little Knight saw what appeared to be a boulder moving! It rose. Immediately every light in the hall went out except those burning like stars over each interested face. Through the semidarkness he peered eagerly. What he had taken for a boulder must be a Gnome, but so completely enveloped was he in a mantle which was thrown right over his head and fell all around him, the very color of the stone walls of the cave itself, that he looked more like an animated rock. This eerie figure moved slowly forward; immediately another rose from his place and followed; Little Knight's glance swept the wall quickly; there were several other “boulders” huddled against it. They must have taken their places while screened by the band, for he was positive they had not been there when he entered the room. One after the other they rose and advanced slowly; there were nine of them, and a weird uncanny spectacle the shrouded figures presented as they stood in a half circle back of Goromogore's chair.

The King raised his hand; the first eerie figure came forward, and in the better light Little Knight saw there were slits for eyes and arms in the mantle. But the Casket Bearer kept his arms under its folds while he walked, or

rather glided to the left of the King's chair, then silently thrust out his hand and placed a small casket in front of Goromogore, between him and the brimming glasses.

It was about five inches long by three and one half deep, and three and a half wide, made of ivory, perfectly plain but highly polished, the edges and corners distinct, sharp and square. Goromogore pressed a spring; the lid flew up and disclosed a beautiful pearl as large as a bird's egg. He held it up to view; the wisebeards nodded.

Meanwhile the Bearer had silently glided around back of the Throne chair and now stood at Goromogore's right-hand side, where he waited until the jewel was returned to its bed of ivory-colored velvet, when taking up the casket, he stepped to a place at the right end of the semicircle. The second figure had glided forward and stood at Goromogore's left hand. Another casket, a counterpart of the first, was placed before the King; the same ceremonies were observed. This time a glowing ruby was held to view; the graybeards nodded, it was put back in the casket, the second Gnome glided to the right-hand side of the chair, picked up his casket and took his place by the leader. The third casket held a queer, colorless jewel, at which Little Knight would not have given a second glance if he had seen it any other place; but he must look at each and everyone shown here. It was dull and flinty in appearance, square, except that the corners were lopped off. The nod was given, the jewel returned. The fourth stone was a turquoise—like a duck's egg it looked, and beautifully blue. Little Knight's eyes beamed with greater eagerness as the fifth or center figure came forward and gave up his precious burden. In a moment Goromogore held to view an emerald of so lovely a green it seemed the forest must

have rendered up its heart to its making! But the self-same ceremony was gone through; not an eyelash winked more quickly than before as the graybeards nodded. A moonstone followed, to be succeeded by a fiery-hearted opal, a gleaming topaz, and last of all a brilliant diamond. Little Knight had kept track of them all. Thanks to his training at school where he had learned the value of application, he could name over to himself the jewels just as they had appeared. He was certain the magnificent emerald was the Magic Jewel, so long sought, the hope of whose regaining had cost so many lives and caused such untold sorrow! The green of the forest reflected in the heart of the stone! But the ceremony was not yet over.

Again the Bearers brought their caskets to Goromogore's inspection. Little Knight, confident as to what was coming, mentally named each stone as the casket lid flew up. What then was his surprise when thinking, "The ugly stone," as the third casket was set down between Goromogore and the brimming glasses the emerald was held to view! The opal was this time in the center, and the dull flinty stone in the opal's place. The other jewels were placed as before.

After the emerald appeared in the third casket, Little Knight tried to keep track of the Bearers as they went back to the circle, as well as of their gems; much depended upon his knowing whether the caskets or the places of the Gnomes were changed. He found the Bearers exchanged places not caskets, for he of the emerald quietly moved into number four's or the turquoise carrier's place when he left the line, who on returning took the place the emerald had left vacant. Having ascertained this important fact, Little Knight again gave his whole attention to the

jewels as they were held to view. The whole number had for the second time been inspected.

How quiet everything was! What a weird scene for mortal eyes to gaze upon. The vast cavern in the heart of the mountains only lighted by the flickering tapers on the hoods of the odd little creatures seated in silence around the long tables—the King in his white raiment, his sumptuous royal purple cloak and elaborately carved and jeweled crown—the semicircle of eerie figures in their gray dominoes, like shapeless spirits, behind him!

And for the third time they began to move slowly forward. Little Knight's heart beat fast! This was the decisive journey! How intently he watched—he scarcely breathed. They had all changed places this time. The opal came first, followed by the turquoise, the moonstone, the ruby—the flint—the dull, lifeless piece of what!—it did not seem like a jewel at all; Little Knight rubbed his eyes; his heart sank down, down! Surely there was some mistake, he must watch, watch—the diamond, the emerald, the pearl, the topaz! It was over—the dull lifeless piece of flint was in the center casket where he fancied the Magic Jewel would be!—and it was the only one which Goromogore had held to view in his left hand! There was the most important piece of information the little captive Queen of the fairies had been able to learn, and Little Knight knew it was the only thing that could have convinced him that that stone was indeed the precious gem. Had he not known that, he would have tried his best to get hold of the beautiful emerald. Goromogore must exhibit the Jewel to his people at least twice each year, and at any time when its secretion in another place was decided upon. During the ceremony he must hold it to view in

the hand opposite to that in which the “chosen” jewels were exhibited, or his power would be gone. For instance, if he held the other jewels up in his right hand, the Magic Jewel must be shown in his left. To distract attention from this proceeding, which a quick observer might notice, he had hit upon the device of showing the gems three times, feeling that unless the fact were known, no one would follow his movements closely enough to remark his using his left hand but once; it would be natural for their attention to stray at some point during the long ceremony, and they would not know it was the only jewel he had held in his left hand.

It was only through hearsay that Fairasmorn had come by this knowledge and she could only tell him that mere fact; what other jewels there were, how they were exhibited she knew not—except that she was aware certain Gnomes called “Casket Bearers” were intrusted with the keeping of the precious stones—but she had paid so dearly for this meager bit, Little Knight had no doubt that the dull piece of flint was the jewel he sought. He had observed closely and knew positively it was the only gem Goromogore had exhibited in his left hand; he had only done so the third time of its exhibition, and that time, too, it held the central, or place of honor, in the circle. At first he was vaguely disappointed. In all his dreams he had imagined the mystic gem to be inconceivably beautiful, perhaps a diamond of unparalleled brilliancy, a pearl like a melting drop of whiteness, a glistening jewel like the captured end of a fairy rainbow—and when the emerald at first appeared in the center casket, he was sure it must be that. And to think—he could scarcely realize that dark opaque lump was a precious stone at all! Yet,

if it were the Magic Jewel—if? Why it was! And therefore more precious than all the jewels here displayed, fabulous as their value must be—aye, more precious than all the jewels of the Kingdom! The Jewel of mystery, of hopes, of desires, of sorrows and miseries, of untold joy—the stone around which so many dreams had been woven—the Jewel of history, of romance—in short, the Magic Jewel of the Forest! And he, Little Knight, he of all others in all these centuries, had gazed upon it with mortal eyes! Its subtle charms again grew upon him—his heart beat almost to suffocation; he trembled so he took his hands from view on the table and held them firmly clasped in his lap, all the while watching with an eagerness veiled under Patey's vacuous stare, the winding up of the ceremonies.

He had followed the Bearer of the Magic Jewel to his place in the center of the semicircle directly back of Goromogore's chair; he knew he had not changed his position; he kept watching him furtively the whole time; not until he had drank the wine would his vigilance be relaxed, and upon his drinking the charmed liquor so much depended; perhaps the very success of his plan—surely its simplification! The caskets were so exactly alike it would be impossible to tell one from the other on the outside, and shrouded in their uncanny mantles, it would be almost as difficult to follow the right bearer with his eyes; and when he must take his gaze from him in order to reach him, might he not mix in with the others, all of the same height and figure! They alone wore no lamps on their hoods and when they returned to the alcove how could he watch them. And so his anxiety and excitement were so great he could hardly keep up his reputation for Hollowpatish-

ness as the shrouded figures for the fourth time came slowly forward one by one!

But this time each held forth an empty hand and received his reward, a glass of the amber liquid, from the hand of his King. Little Knight was almost all eyes as the fifth figure, he of the Magic Jewel, advanced. What if Goromogore should skip to the sixth glass or the wine should be spilled! But no—the fifth hand was extended, the fingers closed on the stem of the fifth glass—Little Knight's heart gave one mighty bound, then thump, thump, it went furiously, as the Bearer of the Magic Jewel glided slowly to his central place in the semicircle with his drugged wine held carefully before him. When all had been served, Goromogore cried:

"To the downfall of Little Knight Brave, the Wizard! To the recapture of the White Owl! And to Success in all our Undertakings!"

Simultaneously every glass in the hall was lifted and drained, Hollowpate's right down the inside of his neck band; it didn't feel very good, but acted much better than if it had gone right down inside his neck, and, oh, joy! he had seen the unconscious Bearer of the Magic Jewel drain his glass to the very bottom! Then, though it had been poured on the wrong side of his body, Hollowpate's wine seemed to be taking effect. His eyes were so bright they would have betrayed him, but he kept them lowered, only watching with breathless interest the mummified-looking group of Casket Bearers.

At the lifting of Goromogore's hand they glided silently back into the cave from which they had come; when there they gathered in such a shapeless jumble Hollowpate could not have told one from the other even were he looking at

them every second. But he was not; he had turned his gaze toward the opposite side of the table, as could plainly be seen now, for the lights all through the hall had blazed up at their highest as soon as the last shrouded figure



“We are betrayed! A mortal is in our midst.”

stepped back into the alcove. Then suddenly there was a wild commotion at the entrance of the hall and a little fellow with long ears advanced on the run toward the King's table, unceremoniously knocking the Gnomes who were in his way right and left and shouting as he approached:

“ We are betrayed—we are betrayed ! A mortal is in our midst ! ”

The King, horror and a ferocious hatred swelling his face and neck till they looked as though they would burst, jumped to his feet and shouted at the top of his voice :

“ Tu osth gil ! ” Immediately every light in the hall—in brackets, chandeliers, and on hoods, was extinguished—every light except one, which still burned flickeringly on, and shone up in the intense blackness of darkness with an absurd brilliancy for so small a flame—o’er the vacuous countenance of Hollowpate !

For a moment after Goromogore’s command nothing was heard but quick excited breathing. All eyes were turned to the solitary lamp left burning at the royal table. Who was he who had not obeyed the King’s order ? Ah, only Hollowpate ; poor foolish fellow, the wine had put him to sleep ! But back in the hall suddenly a shrill voice screeched, “ Hollowpate ! Hollowpate ! ” It was Jarry who had been sulking all evening over his ignominy and Hollowpate’s triumph, and whose cunning mind had seen in this unusual turn of events a chance for vengeance. At once all was turmoil ; the wildest confusion prevailed. Each one at the table jumped for poor Hollowpate, whose light was soon extinguished. But the first of the assailants to fall upon him found to their amaze and consternation that his clothes were as hollow as his head was said to be ! However, they were buried under such an avalanche of their vindictive fellows that they could not proclaim the fact, which, if known, might have changed the whole after course of events !

CHAPTER XXXI

THE MAGIC JEWEL

LITTLE KNIGHT, as the Casket Bearers started on their return to their quarters, slipped out of Hollowpate's clothes down under the table, which being wide, and the Gnome's legs short, left a good open space to work in. Whisking Wobblejug's hooded cloak from his blouse he quickly enveloped himself in it, and softly, carefully crawled through the aisle formed by the table legs and Gnome legs. He had reached the upper end and was calculating the space between Goromogore's stout limbs and the head graybeard's thin shanks—for he must squirm between them without the slightest touch or he would betray himself—but just as the last Casket Bearer stepped up into the alcove, Presto! The hall was a blaze of dazzling light, through which he could not hope to follow the mystic shrouded figures. He would have to await further developments. Crawling on his hands and knees as near as he dared to the corner of the table, he peered anxiously out trying to see what had become of the mummy-like crowd; they might disappear while he was imprisoned here! He was so excited he could scarcely keep from rushing forth! At that very moment came the commotion at the door. As soon as he heard the voice, Little Knight recognized Tricksy, the scout. In the exciting events of the evening he had completely forgotten him; forgotten that

his enforced sleep was ended at the very hour the meeting had begun—and he had not yet regained the Magic Jewel!

Then came Goromogore's command which he did not understand; but its effects told what the outlandish words must mean. Joy! It was just the thing for him! On hands and knees he darted forth and clambered up the step into the alcove, then straightening up felt his way with surprising quickness over the stony floor. He had it well impressed on his mind in the glare of light of a moment ago, by which he had also seen the nine figures huddled like great boulders against the farthest wall. Almost instinctively he picked out the middle figure, and with utmost caution, down on hands and knees, again he crawled slowly closer, closer; he could tell by the easy, regular breathing that issued from the mantle that the little witch's soothing syrup had gotten in its work—the Bearer of the Magic Jewel of the Forest was asleep at his post! The precious gem, after five centuries in the possession of the wicked Gnomes, was almost within the grasp of this daring, intrepid little mortal!

It took him but a moment to locate the casket under the voluminous folds of the gray mantle; in another he had found the wide arm slit. The polished ivory felt cool to his touch—the fingers of the sleeper relaxed without trouble.

Meanwhile the turmoil increased. The other Casket Bearers became restive; they mumbled among themselves; one or two arose, then fell back again uneasily. So wild and fierce was the struggle going on all over the hall, and so aggravated was its horror by the darkness, that Goromogore at last commanded loudly:

“Nosth gil!” A moment of intense silence, nothing

was changed; but the scrambling recommenced, wilder, if possible, than before!

Little Knight had worked so rapidly and with such quick wit that he had the ivory casket in his possession and had pressed the spring and taken the jewel it contained from its velvet bed before Goromogore gave his second command. He knew from the feel of the lopped-off corners that it was the stone the King had held to view in his left hand. The blood was pounding in his ears and leaping through his veins. If it was the right jewel the Gnome King's Spell was broken, he thought, as holding it just one moment, as the little fairies had told him, he hastily but carefully replaced it in the case and secured it in his bosom. His heart bounded when Goromogore's words proved ineffective. A great joy thrilled him. Now, at this very moment, the forest and everything animate and inanimate within its depths was free, free! And the poor workers at the furnaces—but he had not time to linger in ecstatic thought, his life was in danger—he must make haste to escape!

When the other Casket Bearers realized their King's command was fruitless, they fled wildly and were now mixed with their struggling fellows. Without their presence to guard against and with so much noise and confusion Little Knight threw caution, so far as trying to do things stealthily went, to the winds; in a twinkling the mantle was drawn from the sleeping form and enveloped his own; it was a much better disguise than Wobblejug's cloak, for he had to conceal his face since leaving his mask in Hollowpate's hood at the table. Fearing to get mixed with the crowd and lose his bearings, he kept close to the wall, and soon reached the step leading from the

alcove; turning to the left toward the wall farthest from the entrance he made his way as rapidly and as quietly as possible along the wall, always aiming for the secret door!

"Nosth gil!" the King again bellowed, a note of anguish in his voice, which, when the succeeding moment showed his commands were still without result, communicated itself to the now hopelessly demoralized little people and the struggling was intensified; it seemed each Gnome took his neighbor to be the daring mortal who had stolen into their midst and was determined to kill him!

"Nosth gil!" rang out the King's voice the third time, Tricky echoing the words—but the result was no different. Then came a new command. Little Knight in his gray mantle, working his way speedily toward the secret door, wondered what it could mean.

"Ec nart neeh tot! Ec nart neeh tot! E pac se!"

At last his words had some effect. There was a moment's lull, and Little Knight fairly flew along, his hands groping against the wall; he was at the lower corner—he was at the wall wherein was set the secret door—Would it be open? Not that he doubted his little friends, they would not neglect their part of the programme, but would they be able to work it—they had been afraid to try during the day, for fear of discovery which would make the carrying out of their plans impossible.

After the moment's lull the struggling and surging was continued with even more vigor, but above the roar was heard the King's voice:

"Pungaloo—Pungaloo!" There was no answer to the frenzied call. Next, "Hakrajam, Narkdamone—Pungaloo, Pungaloo!" but only a weird, mocking echo of his

own cry, "Pungal-o-o-o, Pungaloo-o-o-o," reverberated wailingly through the hall.

The panic was at its height, but to Little Knight the crowd seemed to be drawing farther away; were they making for the entrance? He jolted up against a panting form; the Gnome breathed a malediction on him for his awkwardness; it was Sharpwit, who had sat at the foot of the King's table—just opposite the secret door. When the panting scout rushed off, he rapped on the face of the wall—the next instant he felt a rush of cool air in his face—loving arms reached forth and drew him out of the Gnome King's Stronghold, out of the Gnome King's power into the secret room of the Marble Castle!

CHAPTER XXXII

THE TABLES TURNED

ALMOST at the same instant at the opposite end of the King's chamber one of the pillars, the great one in the center of the last row of nine, seemed to break into a mass of flames. The whole lower half of the column up for a distance of ten or fifteen feet had slid to the back, and from this opening, which looked like the mouth of a fiery furnace, rushed hundreds of half-clad forms, bearing blazing torches, down among the now terrified and distracted crowd of Gnomes. Little Knight from his retreat saw that their leader was the man with the long cruel scar on his breast! Then from the main hall were heard wild, loud shrieks—a long red glare burst through the darkness there, and hundreds more of the liberated mortals, each infuriated by the treatment he had received from these wicked little creatures now at their mercy, with flaming torches surged forward and met their brothers!

With centuries of wrongs to right, wrongs to those now dead only to be realized by those yet living who had undergone the same cruel tortures, wrongs impossible to forget, wrongs inflicted by these impish little beings before them, and which, maddened as they were, it must seem no cruelty they could devise would ever sufficiently revenge, with their deadly purpose written on their faces, down among the shrinking Gnomes they surged!

No wonder they shrank back—the avenging multitude, their half-clad bodies towering above the quaking cowering pack, looked like an army of giant savages, and like savages were their awful shouts:

“Roast them over a slow fire!”

“Aye, prod them in their furnaces!”

“Sharpwit, Sharpwit! Roll him in a spiked keg down the mountain side!”

“Goromogore, Goromogore! Put him under the water drop!”

“Tricksy, give him hot lead to drink!” All sorts of horrifying cries were heard from the bearded throats, and they looked as though they meant them!

“Aye, Goromogore, where are you!” called the man with the scar on his breast, and Little Knight started—he knew that voice!

“Here!” and the little Gnome King suddenly dashed off his subjects restraining hold, and stepping forward folded his arms and stood defiantly facing the gaunt-faced giant. “Do with me as you will but let Goromogore be ransom for his people. Without me they would never have thought of robbing the Kingdom of its Magic Gem! Without me they would have been incapable of conceiving half the tortures that have been inflicted—without me they would have been a peaceable people!”

But so deep had been the injuries undergone at these Gnomes’ hands, so weak and overwrought, so crazed with joy were the men by their freedom, so exultant in their power over their always cruel, now cringing enemies, that the Gnome King’s proud pleading for his tribe, the spark of nobility which had at last shone through the crust of wickedness in the sacrifice of self for their sakes, did not

awaken one responsive chord. Not one in the hundreds of half-savage mortals felt the least pang of pity, the least admiration of him! And when the leader cried:

“Boys, what shall we do with him and his impish mob?” they cried:

“Boil them in oil.”

“Let them drink hot lead!” A dozen pairs of hands were thrust forth to clutch him—but at that moment,

“Halt!” rang out a clear boyish treble.

All turned to the lower end of the chamber, all the fierce, savage faces, Goromogore’s now as fierce and savage as any—the hundreds of gaunt, bearded mortals, and startled struggling Gnomes—all toward the secret chamber.

What a picture they saw framed by the rocky arch left open by the secret door which, parting in the middle, had slid back into the wall on either side! The turret chamber was flooded by a soft yet luminous light never till now seen outside of Fairyland!

Toward the right of the arch stood Fairasmorn, Queen of the fairies, her pearl-of-dew crown on her head—the first time in centuries—her white, trailing robes over which pearls-of-dew were scattered like a shower of diamonds, her wand at last restored to her hand, her gauzy wings folded—a vision of entrancing loveliness; the little witch, now in her natural fairy form, with her fantastic dress and peaked cap, her magic pot on her arm, and holding her curious staff like Bopeep’s crook, was at the left; in the middle on a tabouret was the Little Princess in a fairylike creation which made her look like a rose, her eyes filled with childish awe; and Letty beside her, her arm around her little mistress, her countenance alight with many emotions; just a step in advance was the slim

boyish figure of Little Knight with his princely bearing, clad in his forest costume. And before all a semicircle of jet-black, velvety-looking cats—some with yellow, some with green eyes—indeed through the whole picture the black cats appeared—in the Little Princess's arms, at Letty's feet; a great one standing like a guard by Queen Fairasmorn, running all around the little witch, jumping in and out the little pot, playing hide and seek back of the group; and one perched, with wise, blinking eyes, on Little Knight's shoulder.

"Fairasmorn!" murmured Goromogore, and any lingering hope he may have felt, died.

"Little Knight!"

"The Little Wizard!"

And a thrill ran through the multitude—of love, gratitude and exultation as far as the mortals were concerned, of fear and awe on the part of the Gnomes; but after the first startled exclamation all that howling, shrieking mob, foe and foe, Gnome and mortal, were held alike spellbound by the lovely sight. Unconsciously the nerves wrought to the highest tension by the excitement relaxed; the faces, both gaunt and grotesque, softened, assumed a more natural expression. The silence was so complete that each intently listening ear heard every word uttered by the ringing boyish voice.

"Men of the Kingdom," cried Little Knight, "don't do the horrible things you say! We have the Magic Jewel now and these miserable little creatures can never harm us again. The King will know what to do with them, and you will always be glad if you leave them to him instead of taking such a terrible revenge. Goromogore has been brave enough to give himself up for his



"He flew with wide-spread arms . . . to the gaunt-faced leader."

people—maybe they will reform and be of some use—but, oh, don't do such dreadful things!" Then longing for the help, the reassurance, the sympathy of the one who had always been so ready to give it to him, he left his position on the threshold of the secret door and flew with widespread arms, to be clasped close, close to the scarred breast of the gaunt-faced leader who had thrown down his blazing torch and leaped halfway to meet him!

To the eyes of the half-clad torch bearers, long since dry with their multiplied sufferings and wrongs, came the relief of cooling tears; their hearts melted with sympathy in the joy of this reunion, the like of which, thanks to this little hero, they could now look forward to experi-

ence soon themselves; while the Gnomes, who had never before known what tears not caused by physical pain meant, felt an unusual moisture dim their sight.

When the long, loving embrace was over, the father set his boy upon the table where his little friends from the secret chamber joined him. All the struggling masses in the vast hall tried to reach this central point to shake hands with their rescuer, for the Gnomes also now regarded him as such. All sorts of cheers and cries in his honor and praise rang and reverberated through the cavernous depths of the Stronghold. Never was such a scene. When the pandemonium had somewhat subsided Goromogore stepped forward.

"I will not ask you to shake hands with me, Little Knight," said he, "but I wish to say that since Goromogore was to be defeated, he is glad he met his defeat at the hands of the most daring, the most courageous and the kindest hearted Little Knight Brave he has ever known. I can say truly that I am glad you and your father are reunited; had I known he possessed such a son, verily, I think me, I would have released him and sent him back to you!" He was about to step back, but Little Knight held forth his hand.

"We all wish to be good friends hereafter, Goromogore," he said. "Won't you shake hands on the compact?"

"Never did I anything with so much pleasure," said the King heartily. He was much affected by the little mortal's kindness; there were tears in his gray eyes. "I now see where you get your reputation for wizardry—Goromogore is himself under your spell!"

"Yes," broke in Little Mother Heart-of-Gold, "by his

kind heart he won the love and gratitude of all the inhabitants of the forest, and when the time came they did all they could to show it to him!"

When the little witch ceased speaking, Fairasmorn went forward and held out her tiny hand to the Gnome King.

"I, too, have felt his wizardry, Goromogore," said she. "For the sake of our mutual friend, Little Knight Brave, we will let bygones be bygones!"

"O Fairasmorn!" exclaimed the King, now thoroughly unmanned, "can you forgive me!" As soon as he said the words a wondrous change was wrought in his nature; the spell of pride and wickedness which had held him enthralled all his life was broken, as it always is for either king or peasant, gnome or mortal, who has been granted the grace to say the magic word "forgive." Goromogore had never looked so kingly as then.

As the little Queen silently placed her hand in his, there suddenly rang through the hall a frightened, piercing cry:

"The Magic Jewel! The Magic Jewel!" and into the midst of the astonished crowd rushed the disheveled, newly awakened Pungaloo, more astonished and startled than they, when he found himself in such strange company. He stood wildly tearing his beard, which unlike the beards of the others—which were iron-gray—was white as a snow-drift and reached almost to the toes of his pointed shoes, making up for the lack of hair on his head which was as smooth and polished as the ivory casket he had so illy guarded. So comical a picture he made as he stood there in his scant attire, his little eyes darting in every direction, trying, doubtless, to ascertain whether this scene was

real or he was dreaming, that the solemnity which had settled down on the throng was broken; smiles began to lighten the grave countenances.

"Pungaloo!" exclaimed the King. The bewildered little Gnome stopped tearing his beard and turned in the direction of the voice.

"Come forward!" Trembling like a leaf, the poor little thin body obeyed the command. "Pungaloo," said Goromogore, a deep frown between his brows, his arms crossed on his bosom, "from this time forward you are in the service of a new master, Little Knight Brave, to whom you delivered up the Magic Jewel!"

Both Pungaloo and Little Knight looked so dismayed that the smiles became shouts of laughter,—a genuine laugh all together sometimes works wonders—in this instance it cleared the atmosphere marvelously. The mortals forgot for the time how these little beings had oppressed them; the Gnomes that now they were prisoners, and they were chatting together like old friends.

"I thank you, Goromogore, but I do not think I would know quite what to do with Pungaloo, and I am afraid he would be unhappy with me," said Little Knight, hating to appear ungracious but not at all wanting the little old Gnome, while Pungaloo's eyes danced with joy. By renouncing him Little Knight had gained his goodwill forever.

"Well, well," said Goromogore, a twinkle in his own gray orbs, "I have heard your mortals' story of the white elephant, and I don't want to make Pungaloo that—he is white enough, certainly, but not quite the size for the rôle; nor do I wish to encumber you—but—I forgot I was exceeding my authority—I have neither the right to give

nor withhold!" Little Knight and the Little Princess looked sorrowfully at each other, then at him.

"Don't feel too bad, Goro," whispered the little girl. "I think everything will be settled so that we shall all be happy. My father and all these poor men here, as you know, think so much of Little Knight they will do anything for him, and you may be sure he will not ask anything cruel!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

ON THE DRAGON'S STAIR

NEVER was such a night known in the forest! Acting upon Queen Fairasmorn's advice to trust him, Goromogore's promise to keep faith with the mortals was accepted, and he was deeply touched by their confidence when all except the original castle crowd went off, leaving him and his tribe unguarded in their Stronghold. He led in three ringing cheers for their generous captors—cheers which were doubled and trebled, when suddenly all the long tables in the vast cavern were seen to be loaded with the most appetizing fare! The Little Princess had pressed the magic ring! The place was still echoing with their shouts when Little Knight's party left, the little witch returning to the castle as she had come, in order to throw open the great entrance hall, while the other "soup tureeners" went out by another secret door which Goromogore had already shown them, in that part of the wall of the turret chamber which projected from the main body of the building. It opened on the mountain side directly above the road, with the sesame,

Open door,
To Goromogore!

and three single raps.

They hurried to the Dragon's Stair, where the guards turned terrified faces to them in the moonlight.

"The forest is alive," cried one of the bunch, for they were huddled, literally, in a bunch, like spring onions, as near as they could press to the middle door, which opened just then from within and let them fall, with wild yells, into the marble hall, at the feet of the little witch!

As soon as she could control her laughter, Fairasmorn explained things to them, and bade them join their brethren in their Stronghold. Jugglekeg was found cowering under the kitchen sink, having preferred capture by the mortals to standing alone outside where the trees were clapping their hands and shaking their heads at him crying, "Begone, begone!" Oh, the forest was taking a brave revenge! Hollowpate had slept soundly through the whole disturbance, and was loath to join his tribe when given his clothes and told where to find them, till the Little Princess, taking a tiny enameled pink rose locket from her neck, pinned it to his cape, saying:

"Tell Goro to take particular care of you, Patey; I want you to be my bodyguard when we go home," and as much pleased with his decoration as a soldier with a new stripe, the little Gnome hastened away to be the envy of the comrades who had been prepared to pounce upon him with reproaches.

The "little fiends," as Letty persisted in calling them, settled, they had time to attend to their own people; and in a few minutes the brave warriors—who could not believe their eyes at first—were seated at great tables, which had appeared as if from the ground, in the road which swept the mountain's base, loaded with every good thing imaginable to eat!

With every moment of freedom they seemed to lose some of their gaunt, hunted looks, and become more like

themselves. What happy exchange of confidences was there—what blissful anticipations for the morrow! Wild cheers broke out every now and then as some sore oppressed heart realized more acutely that they were at last free, while the name of Little Knight Brave was heard continually ringing the whole length of the tables.

The fairies were delighted with the pleasure they had been able to give their poor fellow-captives, but they soon flew off to make a brief visit to their beloved Fairyland, intending to return and stay with their “mortal dear ones,” as Fairasmorn called them, till they should reach the King’s Palace; and Little Knight, the Little Princess, and Letty took the guards’ place at the top of the Stair to watch the scene below.

“What was that Goromogore said the Queen told you was ‘lights out’ spelled backward?” asked the Little Princess.

“‘Tu osth gil,’” repeated Little Knight; “all his other commands were given the same way, and I thought it was some kind of Gnome gibberish!”

“Isn’t it grand to think all their wickedness is ended!” said Letty.

“And that he can’t change anybody into animal forms any more! Just think, if your own father had spoken to you that time he saved you in the forest, he would have remained a deer when the time came for him to go to work again, so Goromogore would know he had spoken to a mortal; then he would have been tortured! But you were so far in at that time there was as much danger in turning back as coming on!”

“His toils and snares were complete—weren’t they? and if father had spoken to me, they would have guessed

the truth, and knowing just about where I was, might easily have entrapped me!"

"But they didn't," said Letty cheerily, "and to think, lambie, that it was your Little Knight, after all, who came through the little fiends to rescue us! And I half the time not listening to your prattle about him, when, if I had known, I couldn't listen half enough, nor your little tongue wag fast enough to satisfy me!"

"There, Letty!" said the Little Princess reproachfully, "I thought sometimes you were so *subtracted* like, that you didn't hear one word I was saying."

"What do you think," exclaimed Little Knight suddenly, "this is exactly my ninth night in the forest!" their eyes grew round.

"Well, I never!" ejaculated Letty, throwing up both hands in surprise, while the Little Princess breathed in an awed voice:

"Goromogore's magic number! O Little Knight, he is defeated, for sure!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

BACK TO THE KINGDOM

LITTLE KNIGHT was so tired after the adventures he had gone through since coming into the forest, so care-free now that the Magic Jewel was recovered, and there were so many broad shoulders to bear his burdens, that even his father's fond kisses when he arose before daylight only made him murmur and turn over for another delicious sleep. But the sun was scarcely up, when he was awakened by such a queer rustling and fluttering and twittering, that for a moment he wondered what it could be; then he thought he had better open his eyes and see, and then—well, if he didn't "sit up and take notice," scarcely believing he was awake, till a saucy little robin flew right on to his pillow, flapped his wings delightedly and chirped:

"Just arrived, Little Knight, and clean tuckered out!" which expression seemed to be the regular thing in the forest.

"O Flip-flap, you darling! How did you get here so soon? Your wings surely are all right by this time! But don't try to talk till you are rested!"

"Oh, I must," said Flip-flap; "seems to me I have so much to say that if I don't get started right this blessed minute I'll never get it said at all," and the little bird chattered while Little Knight rose and made his toilet, tell-

ing everything that had happened since Little Knight had left them that fateful morning.

At last he came to the happenings of the night before, and told how the whole forest had rocked and swayed in a very ecstasy of freedom at the very moment Little Knight took the Magic Jewel in his hand. The leaves had



“O Flip-flap, you darling! How did you get here so soon?”

whispered the joyful news to them and they could none of them wait till dawn to start for the castle, where they knew he would be found, for the trees here had told those farther on, till the whole forest was aware of it. Chub-chub and Cherry had given out by the time they reached Craggy Heights, and Mother Redbreast concluded she would stay and await the return of the party there. They

were dreadfully disappointed, but sent him their love and many messages. They had passed Silvertip the Scout; he was so jubilant, Flip-flap was afraid he would have his silver tip worn to shreds waving it so much in the wind—he simply couldn't keep still—he was to give his best love and congratulations to Little Knight, and to tell him he was on his way to meet him. They were halfway to Craggy Heights when the King of the Bullfrogs hailed them, and when they flew down, if there wasn't every blessed frog in Marshland sitting on toadstools! And one who called himself "Bully" said to tell Little Knight they were all on the lookout for his coming; and all the Cottontails were out—Fleetfoot was hopping this way at a great rate—and Madam Quill!

What a chat they did have, to be sure, which Robin and Chip-chap coming in, puffing and blowing, helped along.

"We waited to see Mother and the little girls settled," said Robin, between puffs, "but this little fellow couldn't hold in a minute. It's the first time he's been wild, though, since his adventure with the Bad Boy, and as we were all afflicted the same way we didn't mind him!"

Letty declared she didn't think there could be any more surprises for her until she saw the Redbreast family sitting sociably on the breakfast table, and Little Knight talking to them, "just as if they were Christians!" Of course, he had told them about the night he had spent in the nest, but somehow she hadn't realized it till she saw them all chatting. She was half afraid to let her little mistress be initiated, but when she saw her laughing heartily and enjoying the little birds' quaint twittering, she too, went under the charm, for though they could not grow small unless in a tree, they could be made to under-

stand the bird language. How delighted she was when she found she could tell every word they were saying! But soon there were all sorts of calls for Little Knight—the castle was surrounded by such a company as was never before seen! Fairies and birds were perched in every available place, as well as flying through the air, and all sorts of little wood inhabitants were represented.

But the men were so eager to be off on their long and tedious, though happy, tramp home, that as soon as Little Knight appeared with Letty and the Little Princess, all three were lifted into the completest little landau ever dreamed of, which the Fairy Queen had “waved up” from the ground! It was made of mother-of-pearl, with pale-pink silken cushions and lining, and drawn by six beautiful, snow-white ponies, with lines of pink and buckles of mother-of-pearl. This surprise was hardly over when a great trampling was heard, and down from the mountains came hundreds of horses, galloping into the road, all with costly trappings—silver, gold, and jeweled—some of which had been brought into the forest by riders now gone this many a year, others, and not the least valuable, of the Gnomes’ own design and workmanship. Many of the steeds had been bred in the mountains; a few had masters in the crowd. Little Knight Brave’s father, the chosen leader of the rescued men, was overjoyed when Squatty led to him his own beloved chestnut, with a costly jewel-studded saddle and harness of Gnome manufacture, and the beautiful animal recognized his master with a delighted whinny!

Goromogore felt well repaid for this first gracious act when the men united in enthusiastic cheering of his name! Their leader then formally gave him the freedom of the

mountain till he should hear from the King, and in return gladly accepted his offer to send squads of his sturdy little fellows to clear the roads and show them the shortest route to the Kingdom.

All the inhabitants of Gnomeland and Fairyland who were not to accompany them, crowded on to the castle steps, in the windows and on the roof, and massed together on the sides of the mountain to watch their departure, and to send cheer after cheer ringing through the forest as they moved off. Cheer answered by cheer from the happy regiment of men returning to home and freedom, with the Magic Jewel of the Forest safe in their possession!

All were eager to know just how Little Knight had succeeded in gaining possession of the precious Jewel, and so during the hours of rest he related to them his adventures. Like a true little knight he glossed over his hardships and made much of the help he had received, taking no credit for his own intelligence and quick action in making the best use of it, and totally ignoring the selfishness which had led to its being forthcoming! But men like those who had gone from home and friends to face the unknown dangers of the forest, no matter what personal motive had prompted their desire to gain the Magic Jewel, must necessarily be brave, and so they understood fully all that he left unsaid, and Little Knight became the pride of the noblest men of the Kingdom. Then Little Knight learned how they had been aware that the Magic Jewel was theirs in time to reach the Stronghold before the Gnomes could escape.

The furnaces in the shops were kept burning continuously, two forces being required for this. Though they

were not allowed to speak, they could tell from his looks when any of their companions knew that something unusual was brewing. Thus, when the Gnomes had captured a new victim, some members of the force that was "off duty"—turned loose within a certain radius of the forest in animal form—would surely learn of it either through sight or hearsay, and the others reading the bad news from their anxious faces, all would from that moment be on the alert to hear or see anything they could concerning the new unfortunate, until at last he was brought to the workshop and became one of their hopeless band. Therefore, when Little Knight's father returned "to duty" the day he had been so fortunate as to warn his boy of Squatty's and Cheerful's presence, they knew at once from his sad looks another unfortunate had come on the Quest, and awaited with pity and anxiety the newcomer's appearance in their midst. As day succeeded day, some learned this last adventurer was a mere boy, and that he was yet at large. Those who had been unable to hear or see anything were sure he had been wounded or killed and were puzzled by the furtive looks of hope which their wiser comrades cast upon them whenever they got the chance.

And so, when the forest was freed by Little Knight's holding the Jewel, there were enough among both forces who understood the meaning of the strange occurrences to explain to the others.

Goromogore had thought so little of the chances his victims had to escape, that he had not tried to keep the commoner secret passages and entrances from their knowledge, so they lost no time getting into the Stronghold. While his centuries of success had not made the little Gnome King any the less vigilant, they made him

too sure that no mortal could elude his magic, and he never dreamed that from the very heart of his Stronghold, the very midst of his tribe, while extra precautions were being taken to guard it, the Magic Jewel could be quietly abstracted from under his very eyes.

As they left the vicinity of the castle Little Knight received one ovation after another. Delegations from all the different little wood dwellers met him all along the route, and when they neared the different Kingdoms whole tribes were out in gala fixings, and all his friends were immediately friends with each other, for a common cord had been struck in each breast—that of gratitude and love!

It was a journey never to be forgotten. The men were delighted and vowed that nothing would ever again tempt them to harm one of these little denizens of the woods.

As they neared the Kingdom their excitement grew. What would they find—did the people know anything of what was going on in the green depths?

On the fourth day, an hour or so after noon, the road-makers, who were some distance ahead of the main procession, reached the edge of the forest.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE KINGDOM TRIUMPHANT

THE day after Little Knight fared forth so unexpectedly upon the Quest, Silvertip delivered his message. His mother interpreted it aright. She at once notified his Majesty, and after the first few days they decided it would be as well to tell those in the neighborhood the cause of his absence, for they guessed the Gnomes would know of his presence in the forest by that time. The boys always talked with such confidence of his return, taking it as a matter of course that his mother liked to have them gather round her door in the evenings, and her home soon became the favorite meeting place for the neighborhood.

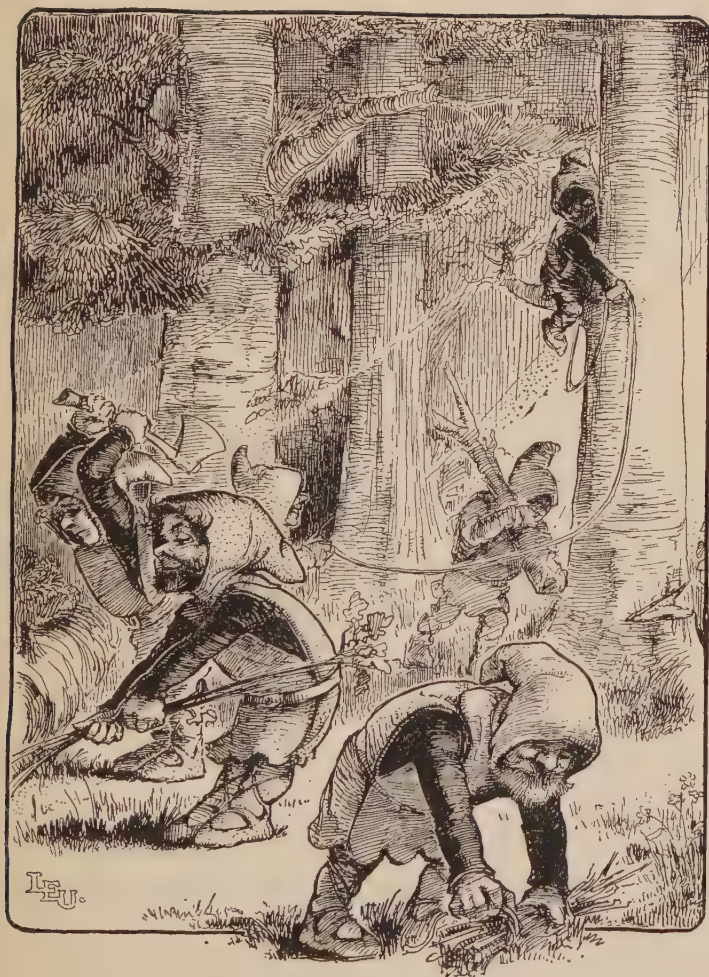
Thus the days passed. It was between half past nine and ten o'clock on the ninth night after Little Knight had departed, and the group were just beginning to separate, when, as suddenly as a clap of thunder out of a clear sky, the trees in the forest swayed and rocked with a mighty rush and roar, the dark belt across the way bending their topmost branches almost to the roofs of the cabins! All sprang to their feet, instinctively clutching each other and crowding into the little room like frightened cattle. In the light of the lamp, burning serenely on the window sill, they stared into each other's pale faces, with questioning eyes. Finally, nothing alarming happening, one of their

number ventured to go to the door. "Come, come!" he called excitedly, and all crowded out with as much haste as they had crowded in.

The trees were still swaying and rustling; it seemed as if the leaves were clapping, clapping together; the whole mighty forest seemed to be in the grasp of a driving gale, though every place else there was only the same soft breeze that had been blowing all the evening. The noise the forest made was terrific, like the roar of a maddened ocean, and above the swaying tree tops, with twitter and song, night though it was, could faintly be heard the rush and sweep of wings of thousands of birds flying hither and thither and yon (in an ecstasy of joy, though the people of the Kingdom did not know that); then the cries of the wild animals—all the terrifying voices of the wilderness raised in mighty concert!

By this time the Outer Circle began to be filled with spectators from all parts of the city—every circle gave up its quota, and finally, as the commotion continued unabated, the King with his guards arrived on the scene. Soldiers were dispatched to keep the excited crowd in order, for all sorts of rumors were afloat, some declaring that the Gnomes were being swallowed up in their own magic, and that the forest was going with them; others that they were about to make a raid on the city!

The King himself went directly to Little Knight's home. He spoke a few moments with Little Knight's mother, and finding they both had come to the same conclusion, he sent forth his heralds to proclaim that it was the belief of his Royal Majesty the King that the unheard-of commotion was caused by the forest shaking off the enchantment—that at last, after five hundred years of



“ ‘These little creatures have only been sent ahead to clear the way!’ ”

failure, the Quest had been ended successfully—that the Magic Jewel of the Forest was once more in the possession of the Kingdom, having been restored by Little Knight Brave!

Such shouts as rent the air! It had been a general holiday ever since, except for provision stores, hotels, and transportation companies—they were busier than ever, and had to call in their friends to help them. People from all parts of the Kingdom had been flocking to the City of Circles, coming in every day, almost every hour!

Dense crowds had thronged the Outer Circle every day—expecting, waiting, they scarcely knew what—so when there burst into view of the astounded multitude a horde of the queerest-looking little beings they had ever seen, dressed in russet-colored clothes, with long cloaks to which were attached odd, high-peaked hoods, and wearing grotesque, pointed shoes, and each carrying some weapon, as the people took them to be, pickaxe, shovel, saw, hatchet, every imaginable sort of instrument for clearing the road, the horrified people crushed back—their first thought had been right—the Gnomes were about to annihilate them and gain the city! Even the King for the moment fancied this; then seeing the nature of the implements they carried, and catching sight of the glitter of steel afar through the trees, he divined the truth, and shouted forth a command to the foremost in the crowd, who were in imminent danger of causing a panic in their frenzied efforts to leave their places in the front ranks, which they had striven all morning to maintain!

“Halt! Our men are just behind. These little creatures have only been sent ahead to clear the way!” Looking in direction of the well-remembered voice, the home-

comers caught sight of their King standing up in his landau, at each side of which, and flanking the road they had cleared for the warriors, the Gnomes had soberly drawn up in two ranks.

There was a moment's surprised silence; then came a "huzza" which made the welkin ring again, and which was echoed by the forest party with such lusty good will that the people knew numbers of those who had gone forth on the fatal Quest were returning, and became frantic with joy!

A minute more and the procession, glittering with silver and gold, and the blue gleam of steel, brightened with colors of every hue, each knight in his own company's uniform, each riding a magnificent horse, came from under the trees, into whose enchanted shadows they had disappeared so long ago. What cheering there was as friend caught sight of friend! The King's head was bared in the presence of these noble men of his Kingdom, many of whom had left home and little ones for his sake, to return to him, if possible, his one beloved blossom, the Little Royal Lady of the Court! He was standing, and greeted each warrior affectionately as he passed; there was no time for questions; at any rate the brave fellows would not have divulged their knowledge; they wished the truth to be first heard from the lips of their hero, Little Knight Brave.

It is useless to try to describe the excitement when the mother-of-pearl landau reached the side of the Royal equipage! Little Knight was seen to take the Little Princess's hand, and with the grace of a young courtier place it in that of the King; but what was said was lost in the wild cheers of the wilder cheerers, as both Little

Knight and the Little Princess were lost in the glad embrace of the overjoyed King and Queen!

Or the meeting between Little Knight and his mother, the reunion of the little family—the meetings and reunions all along the route—throats were almost split with enthusiasm, yet no one seemed able to cheer loud enough, or long enough, or often enough, to satisfy himself!

When they had time to look around them, Little Knight declared the enchantment must have left the forest only to fall over the city, for the Outer Circle looked like an enchanted avenue in Fairyland; lanterns of every color and shape hung everywhere, and, together with flying bunting and waving flags, almost hid the little cabins, and changed the dark belt of old forest monarchs into giant Christmas trees! And as they went onward they saw the whole city had been transformed into one gay parterre of color! The people must surely have expected something, the home-comers thought, and right royally had they prepared a reception!

Before they had started from the Outermost Circle, Little Knight and the Little Princess returned to their places in the beautiful little landau among their friends, and with Letty, who was one happy flutter, because of the King's and Queen's warm greetings and praises! And what wonder and admiration the fairy vehicle and its oddly assorted occupants created!

Silvertip was sitting on the dashboard, with such a look of satisfaction on his face and in the tilt of his bushy tail, the white tip of which curled out of the center of a huge nosegay, that the delighted children fairly roared with laughter, which was by no means diminished when they caught sight of Chatterbox, resplendent in garlands

of apple blossoms, bowing gravely to everybody. Fairasmorn, more radiant than day, with her Maids of Honor, Dewbright and Stardawn, and the Little Witch, with Prince Joli beside her, all visible to mortal eyes for this wonderful occasion, poised on the high back of the seat occupied by Little Knight and the Little Princess. From Little Knight's shoulder Flip-flap twittered excitedly to the delighted multitude, Chub-chub and Cherry balanced daintily on the spray of roses in the Little Princess's lap, while Chip-chap chirped from Little Knight's spray, and on a beautiful little ivory casket between the two, Father Robin Redbreast and his motherly spouse stood guard. At their feet was a pale-pink satin cushion on which were a quaint pair who attracted much attention—a pretty rabbit, Fleetfoot, decked out in brier roses, and the queerest-looking little animal, who turned out to be Madam Quill, like an animated patch of forget-me-nots, her sharp little eyes taking in everything. But what, perhaps, amazed everyone more than anything else were the passengers who shared the seat with Letty—for from either side of her two great bullfrogs gaped sociably around—Prince Bully and Goggle-Eyes in their dress suits! And overhead flew the puffy-checked Maybreeze playing the most enchanting airs on his lily-bud trumpet and sending delicious draughts of fragrance on delightful zephyrs far down the line!

And the arrival at the King's Palace where the little hero and heroine of the day were carried on the shoulders of the men amid a sea of laughing faces and clapping hands, to the welcoming arms of the waiting ladies and courtiers where they were almost smothered by caresses!

The ovation—the King's "Welcome Home" to the Knights who had endured untold miseries for the sake of

King and country—the announcement that after a few days of rest the grand celebration of the event would be held in the forest—the evening of rejoicement throughout the Kingdom and in the King's Palace, where of course Little Knight and his parents and friends remained! The presenting of the casket containing the Magic Jewel to the King by Little Knight Brave, who, when he opened the ivory case upon the King's request, was greatly surprised to behold, instead of the lifeless, flintlike stone he had expected to see, a glowing jewel of radiant green with a beautiful tree of a darker shade in the center—a tree which seemed alive, for its branches quivered as Little Knight's hand trembled with excitement, while numbers of glinting, diamondlike sparks which looked like birds flew from their leafy shelter, filling the whole stone with a glittering, flashing light, dazzling to behold!

The first few moments Little Knight was spellbound with astonishment; then from his lips came a blissful, satisfied, long-drawn sigh—this, this—was the Magic Jewel of the Forest—this was the wondrous Jewel of his dreams!

The King then explained the cause of its transformation—it was one of the characteristics of the Jewel to show the nature of its possessor by the degree of its brilliancy—in passing from Goromogore's to Little Knight Brave's hold, it had reached extremes, changing from its dullest, most lifeless tone, to its most dazzling height of beauty!

Such things are beyond description. Suffice to say that the name oftenest on the lips and in the hearts in every happy home in the Kingdom that night was the name of Little Knight Brave!

CHAPTER XXXVI

“AND SO——”

SOON came the historic day when the great event was celebrated—the welcoming of the grand old forest into the hearts of the people, the welcoming of the people into the grand old forest’s heart!

In accordance with his Majesty’s wishes, representatives from every Kingdom in the forest’s confines were present, while the little Spirit of the Wind and his brother were thrice welcome, for without them it would have been an uncomfortably warm day!

And so, when they were all assembled and the wise and good King of the Kingdom proposed they sign an agreement to live in amity one with the other, and thus all enjoy the forest, never was such enthusiasm known! Goromogore, who had come expecting to hear the official notification to vacate and return to Mount Scrubby, read in public, did not at first believe his ears; and upon being reassured he simply could not utter a word! His Marble Castle at the mountain’s base was his so long as he kept the agreement—the freedom of the whole forest also; while his great workshop was not to be entered without his permission. No wonder the wicked little Gnome King was too overcome with shame and remorse to speak. But he had recovered somewhat by the time the others had expressed their thanks and gratification, and made such a

speech as softened even Silvertip's and Bully's hearts toward him!

Little Knight was the center of a throng of worshippers—men, women and girls. The boys felt sort of strange toward him and stood off in a state of awe and a little, just a little, jealousy. It was a wonder his head wasn't turned, as the saying is, and if it hadn't been for his good little heart there would have been no saving it; but he secretly longed for his release! However, the people were so eager to see him and the Little Princess that they stayed on the Royal Platform until the exercises were over and the crowds were beginning to "line up" to view the Magic Jewel, which, guarded by "reliefs" of the Knights of the new regiment, lay sparkling in its ivory casket under a glass case just outside the Royal Marquee.

The Little Princess and Little Knight then lost no time in getting back into their respective "kingdoms."

Being just a boy was, after all, Little Knight thought, the most enjoyable character in which he had had any experience, and he was so much the same "old-time" Little Knight, as soon as he got the chance to be, that the other fellows soon forgot their strangeness and envy, and rallied around him more admiring than ever, the most enthusiastic worshipers in the Kingdom! They hunted up Goromogore and begged him to allow them to go through his Castle and see the secret passages.

"Any time Little Knight wishes to bring you!" said he, pleased with their admiration which they were not slow in showing; for anyone who could "magic" things the way he did must of course command a certain respect, especially as he had reformed and needed encouragement. The wonderful marble Castle Grim with its glass fur-

niture, beautiful beyond description, in time became the Mecca of excursionists from all parts of the land; but only to Little Knight Brave and the Little Princess and their friends did Goromogore reveal much of his "magic!"

Little Knight remained the favorite leader among the boys. Clubs of all kinds named in honor of each of his adventures flourished all through the Kingdom. There were the "White Owls" and "Silvertips" and "Bats"; "Bullys," "Goggle-Eyes," and "Jolis"; the "Swans" were numerous, while the Redbreast family were named collectively, singly, and in groups; and there wasn't a town but had its Chatterbox Debating Society and its Pedestrian Squad of Fleetfooters!

As to the women and girls, they reveled in "Chubchub and Cherry Teas," "Fairasmorn Lawn Fêtes," "Dewbright," and "Stardawn Socials," and any number of "Mother Heart-of-Gold" and "Madam Quill Sewing Circles," while "Little Witch Walking Clubs" were to be seen flitting along almost every road in the Kingdom 'most any time of the day! But of course the "Little Knight Braves" and the "Little Princesses" of all kinds were in the lead!

Little Knight's own special Brigade was called the "Knights of the Rose"; all his old friends, including the Bad Boy, together with a great many new ones—and Hollowpate of course—belonged. Hollowpate reported it in Gnomeland, and nothing would do but that Little Knight must organize one among them too. All the Gnomes he had met and a great many more were in it, and Pungaloo became their mascot. The emblem of both brigades was the Little Royal Lady Rose, which decorated their hats and cloaks; even their buttons were molded in that

form, and their clothes, which were fashioned after Little Knight's own, were trimmed with the pretty design.

Little Witch walking skirts became all the rage among the girls—and the grown-ups, too—and when it was learned that the Little Princess always had a little round gypsy pot full of jonquils in her boudoir, the manufacturers could not supply the demand for the unique flower-holders, and florists were in despair because they could not raise enough of the golden blossoms to fill them. But the Little Princess's pot had been made by the master workmen of the Gnomes, and when presented to his little favorite by Goromogore on her first visit to him in his Marble Castle, was filled with the most beautiful jonquils ever mortal laid eyes upon—and as the pot was "magicked" its supply of the gorgeous yellow beauties never failed!

By order of the King, the Adventures of Little Knight Brave were written down in gold letters on ivory parchment, and bound in a beautiful book, with pearl covers and jeweled clasps. This magnificent volume was placed among the greatest treasures of the Kingdom, along with the old suit of forest green which he had worn while on the Quest. There also was the Magic Jewel of the Forest itself, while in a case made specially for them were the little bunch of feathers from the good little robins' breasts, the tattered frog skin, the odd Gnome chain with the pendants in which were imprisoned the little swan fairies, the faithful little danger quills, Prince Joli's diamond bottle, the cocoanut shell in which Chatterbox had come to Little Knight's rescue, the lily-bud trumpet, and the topaz phial which had contained the little witch's "soothing syrup." As for the magic napkin ring, Little Knight or the Little Princess wore it constantly. Upon these

treasures people from far and near came to gaze in awe, which grew as they recalled the particular adventure in which each had so prominently figured.

Little Knight Brave and the Little Princess were never separated long at a time. Every year of their lives they spent several happy weeks in Fairyland, and often visited Goromogore in his Castle at the foot of the mountain. As for the Robin Redbreasts, some of the family were always with them, and many a pleasant hour did they spend with the loving little birds in their forest home—indeed all the little wood dwellers remained their devoted friends forever and were never happier than when entertaining them and their “chums.”

And so the time passed, and the Little Princess and Little Knight grew, and grew, till finally they were quite grown up.

And one summer day when the roses bloomed as never before, and the birds surpassed themselves in singing, when the Spirits of the Wind blew fragrant zephyrs all through the whispering tree tops, there was the grandest time that ever was heard tell of all through the lands of the forest, and all through the cities and towns, down to the very smallest hamlet over which the good and wise King ruled—it was the wedding day of Little Knight Brave and the Little Princess!

Such a ringing of joy bells—such a feasting—such a general jubilation—it was away beyond the experience—and even the imagination—of the oldest inhabitant!

And so they were married and lived happy ever after, as did everybody else in the United Kingdom.

And when nightfall and story time come, no matter how many or how wonderful the tales that are told in

Fairyland and Birdland, Squirreldom and Marshland, Burrowtown and Quillville, Chattertown and every land in the forest, even in the Kingdom of the Gnomes—and of course in the Kingdom that claims the hero as its own—the one that is liked best of all, that is oftenest told yet never grown tired of, is the story of "The Adventures of Little Knight Brave!"



"And so they were married and lived happy ever after."

(1)

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